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FABLE

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GOOD
OR
EVIL?

DRINKING GAMES

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Wasted

DS Q&A

Nintendo
Talks Trash

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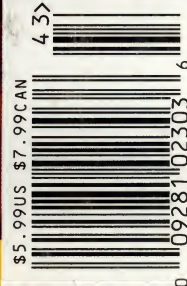
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REVIEWS

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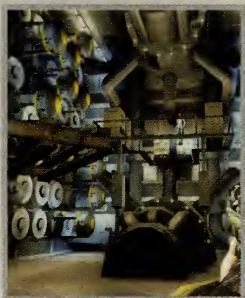
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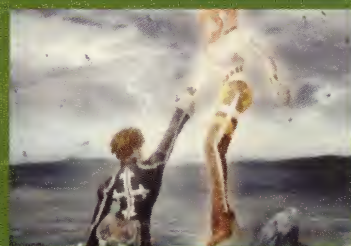
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Let the Games Begin

No, we're not talking about the Summer Olympics or the next wave of reality TV shows primed to dumb down prime-time television—please. This fall and winter, it's all about scientist-turned-freedom fighter Gordon Freeman, the genetically enhanced supersoldier Master Chief, and a San Andreas thug named Carl Johnson. The number of highly anticipated games we'll finally be playing this year is off the hook.

Even once you look past the *Half-Life 2*, *Halo 2*, and *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* holy trinity, you still have the makings of a successful holiday season with *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater*, *Metroid Prime 2 Echoes*, and *Gran Turismo 4*, arguably the most anticipated racer in years. Given the glut of top-tier titles amassed at the frontline, gamers will be fighting their way through great games for months to come, but some publishers with good games this winter may suffer stunted sales due to the overwhelming firepower of the blockbusters. It will be our duty as dedicated gamers at *SURGE* to comb through the carnal wreckage of this blitzkrieg to find the diamonds in the rough and make sure credit is given where it's due.

Even when you look beyond the triple-A titles, 2004 should still be a banner year for gamers. As the battle for mobile dominance heats up, Nintendo plans to have the new DS ready for the masses by Christmas. On the PC front, Alienware and Voodoo will unveil amazingly fast gaming systems with dual graphics cards before the end of the year. HDTVs continue to drop in price, which makes them a great buy to enhance the console experience. With the introduction of the amazing EA Sports lineup on Xbox Live and the inclusion of multiplayer in PS2 titles like *Ratchet and Clank: Up Your Arsenal*, online gaming should continue to grow at its frantic pace.

With all of these remarkable titles and technologies infiltrating our households, do we really need to be concerned about the next-generation consoles already? Let's bask in the glow of this golden age for a while before we focus too heavily on what's next.

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SHE'LL CLEAN YOUR CLOCK

You made some very good points about attracting female gamers to consoles and PCs ("Love & Rockets," Summer issue). Much was said about changing titles and genres to accommodate their unique tastes in gaming, but I want you to know there are girl gamers who are turned on by the RPG, FPS, and MMORPG titles out there today. I'm married to Zerg Girl Bitch Queen Goddess of the Universe. She is the gamingest girl I've ever seen, and she will flat wipe up the floor with your butt if you're not careful.

My gal sprays lead and arrows with the best of them. Whether it's *Starcraft*, *Warcraft*, *Diablo*, *Diablo II* (for which she was a Beta Tester), *Rainbow Six*, *Ghost Recon*, or *Deus Ex*, you can bet she is wading waist-deep into the beasties. Zerg Girl spraying a wall o' lead with the 50 caliber in *Ghost Recon*? That's just plain sexy!!!

—Scott Riddle
AKA, The Overmind

GO BACK TO YOUR TREE FORT

Why do we need to change videogames so girls can play? If they don't want to play *Halo* or *Conflict Desert Storm*, they can go watch *Sex in the City* and talk about nail polish.

—The Old Softy

The women we interviewed didn't advocate changing the existing market to placate female gamers; they were interested in expanding the industry to include more games by and for women. That way, you can keep shooting your misogynistic guns in your lonely existence while the mainstream ladies can finally join the realm of interactive entertainment with games they enjoy.

"I THINK I'LL BUY THE NINTENDO DS OVER THE SONY PSP BECAUSE THERE'S NO WAY I CAN GO BACK TO CARRYING A BOOKLET FULL OF DISCS WITH ME WHEN I GAME ON THE GO."

STRIKINGLY SIMILAR

SNOWBLIND RIP-OFF

I understand you gave *Baldurs Gate: Dark Alliance 2* a 6/10. Personally, I think *Champions of Norrath* is a rip-off of *BGDA* and *BGDA2*, but you gave the score. Anyway, I would like to know why the interplay web site doesn't work and if there are any plans for a third edition of *BGDA* because of the ending story line in the second game.

—F1RelcEdARKLiGHT

Of course *Champions of Norrath* is similar to *BGDA*—they are made by the same developer! Now that Interplay has imploded and California officials have closed its offices, it's tough to say what will happen to *Dark Alliance*, but we'll let you know if we hear something.



HOT TOPICS SEQUELITIS?

Some gamers argue that sequels are a positive way to give the people what they want. Others warn that these retreads stifle creativity and may ultimately lead to the endless recycling of old games. On page 68, we talk to some game gods and analysts about the overabundance of sequels on the market. What's your take on sequelitis?

GOTY

Game of the Year often goes to one of great titles released each fall and winter, even though some of the best games come out in the first half of the year (like 2003's fabulous *Knights of the Old Republic*). Which of the games you've played this year warrants consideration for game of the year?

NINTENDO AND ONLINE GAMING

At a speech to the Japanese Economic Foundation, Nintendo president Saturo Iwata claimed that customers do not want online games. Given the overwhelming success of titles like *Counter-Strike*, *Battlefield 1942*, *Rainbow Six 3*, and several sports titles, we find this baffling. Nintendo fan boys, we ask you: Would you like to play games like *Mario Kart* and *Metroid Prime* online? Do you agree with Iwata's statement, or do you envy PS2 and Xbox owners for their online capability?

Do you have an opinion on these hot topics or on *SURGE*? Please write to letters@surgemag.com.

MOBILE MADNESS

THE LONE RANGER

I'm excited about all of the new handhelds, but I already know which one is right for me: Nokia's N-Gage QD. Has your jaw dropped yet? Hear me out. The N-Gage QD appeals to me because it's a functional cell phone as well as a new and improved game handheld. Nokia has fixed nearly every flaw that kept me away from the N-Gage in the first place, and they're getting games that I actually want to play. *The Elder Scrolls: Shadow Key*, *Call of Duty*, *Ghost Recon: Jungle Storm*, *DRIV3R*, *Pocket Kingdom*: these are all games that I can't wait to play on the go.

Few developers are making use of the Nintendo DS' second screen (most of the games just throw maps up there), and I'm going to keep a mile distance from Sony's PSP because the handheld itself is ugly and I'm just not interested. As far as handheld online play goes, it's much easier to get cell phone reception than it is to find a Wi-Fi signal. The N-Gage QD costs next to nothing, it has the features I want, and the upcoming games are awesome. I'm going to be one of the first people who engage the QD this fall.

—Jason Lindell

Hey, at least one guy's stoked about the N-Gage.

DS VS. PSP

I think I'll buy the Nintendo DS over the Sony PSP because there's no way I can go back to carrying a booklet full of discs with me when I game on the go. Where is the hard drive? All I know is I could buy two consoles for the price of the PSP—that's an awful lot to spend on a device I'll only use on the plane.

—Anon

The PSP looks awesome! It's much cooler than the crappy stylus-based units that only play retarded Mario games, and it looks cooler, too. It seems a little expensive, but if its catalog is anywhere near what the PS2 offers, I'll finally be able to kiss my Game Boy goodbye.

—El Diablo

In every report I saw about E3, the PSP got more hype than the DS. The DS is way more innovative and has more features. The PSP is just a mini PS2, but that might be enough to win. The PSP can be driven by its name alone, since Sony is gaming's biggest name. Sure, Nintendo is known as the handheld master, but that can all come to an end. Games like *Metal Gear Acid* look much better than games like *Metroid Prime: Hunters* and *Mario 64x4*. Of course, no one will know just how successful either of these new handhelds will be until they actually come out.

—Absolut

I don't see the PSP doing any damage to Nintendo whatsoever. It will almost certainly be twice the price of the DS, and it doesn't have a preexisting game or movie library to

“SONY WILL HAVE TO TACKLE THE PROBLEMS OF A PDA, A PORTABLE MUSIC PLAYER, AND A MOVIE FORMAT IN ADDITION TO THE PROBLEMS OF A REGULAR GAME SYSTEM.”



back it up. All Sony has to start with is the PlayStation brand.

Sony will have to tackle the problems of a PDA, a portable music player, and a movie format in addition to the problems of a regular game system. No one is going to go to a Best Buy and choose a UMD instead of a DVD if both are the same price. Who wants to spend another \$100 to \$200 on a sizeable memory stick for the privilege of putting their own music on a \$300 handheld? I'll just take an iPod, thanks.

The only thing that will reliably sell PSPs is its game library, which looks pretty stale right now.

—Jaded Gamer



Cashing In on the Classics

And you thought *The Suffering's* plot was twisted: Imagine you're flat and pizza-shaped with no arms or legs. You move your stumpy self across a maze by chomping your jaw. You're following a trail of pills—you do nothing but take pills all day long, by the way—and you're trying to pop them fast, because ghosts who don't want you trespassing in this pharmaceutical maze are chasing you. Sometimes fruit goes floating past you for no apparent reason. Did we mention that you can open wide and eat a ghost whole, but only after you've taken a *really* big pill?

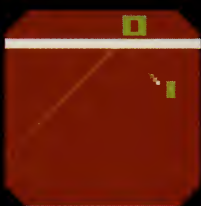
This isn't Courtney Love's dream journal; it's *Pac-Man*, of course, and he and his old-school mates are dusting themselves off for another round of console glory.

Gamers born after the 1970s probably missed out on the first 8-bit videogame blaze of glory, but game makers are making sure these poor souls get a history lesson in 2004. Nintendo recently released a series of eight classic NES and

arcade titles, including *Pac-Man*, *Donkey Kong*, and *Excitebike* for the Game Boy Advance. Sales so far have reached upwards of 350,000 units, an indication that gamers are eager to get their hands on classic titles.

Furthering the revival, TV Games has released a line of battery powered, plug and play-styled game controllers that each contain five to ten classics from Atari (*Pong*, *Asteroids*), Namco (*Dig Dug*, *Galaxian*), or Activision (*Boxing*, *Grand Prix*), depending on the model. They plug directly into a TV's A/V jack and offer immediate, console-free gratification.

We wholeheartedly support celebrating an era where a runt Italian can become a hero by leaping over a series of flaming barrels thrown by an angry ape; but let's not forget that this is the same era when grown women walked around imploring you to gag them with a spoon. History isn't always pretty, kids.



Those Crazy North Korean Dictators!

Of the various reasons to dislike Tom Clancy—he's ubiquitous, he's perversely rich, he wears a bomber jacket in his promotional photos—the people and press of North Korea have taken particular offense to the storyline of his *Ghost Recon 2*, due to drop in November from Ubisoft and Red Storm Entertainment.

In *GR2*, a power-hungry North Korean general begins gaining power during a food famine that he blames on China. When he subsequently attacks the country, players step in as Captain Scott Mitchell, leader of the Ghosts (a U.S. Special Forces unit), and attempt to overthrow the invaders.

Even though the scenario involves a splinter group, not the government, the North Korean press, which is largely controlled by its government, has responded—vehemently—taking out its hostility on the entire U.S.

One *GR2*-inspired editorial in the *Tongil Newspaper* reads, "Through propaganda, entertainment, and movies, [Americans] have shown everyone their hatred for us. This may be just a game to them now, but a war will not be a game for them later. In war, they will only face miserable defeat and gruesome deaths."

Whoa, dude! Spokespeople for Ubisoft and Red Storm Entertainment say they didn't intend to ignite the ire of North Koreans.

"When we looked at East Asia as the setting for our game, we wanted a story that was both believable and not too likely [to happen] in the near future," says Christian Allen, a Red Storm game designer. "With the story line of a power-hungry general sending his troops north into China, we believe we have a plausible setting that remains respectful to current conflicts and events."

Red Storm is used to controversy by now; previous *GR* titles, which dropped the Ghosts in Russia, Africa, and Cuba, have drawn fire, as well. "Russian groups expressed unhappiness at the first *Ghost Recon*, which had the Ghosts



deployed to the Republic of Georgia," Allen says. "However, we often get a lot of support from fans that live in these countries. For example, there were fans in the Russian military that helped us make sure that our uniforms and equipment were as realistic as possible."

Asked to comment on an Ubisoft title being used to stir anti-American sentiment, Ubisoft corporate communications spokesperson Cassie Vogel says, "Ubisoft doesn't get involved in political disputes. We're an entertainment company, we make games."

Ubisoft does not sell games (or bomber jackets) in North Korea.

Kim Jong Il thinks about nuking Ubisoft.

Level 27 Druid Seeks Seasoned Fragger for Sweet Forum Love

Gamers who've been dissed by the opposite sex because they prefer holding a controller to human hands will find redemption—finally—at MMODating (www.mmodating.com), the first online dating service targeted to gamers.

Like any online service, MMODating is a grab bag of hotties, smarties, and curiosities (and a few cross-pollinations of the three), but unlike other sites, these people are dying to have a thoughtful conversation on the future of AI.

Based in Fort Myers, FL, founder John Villafrate, 23, says he started the web site "just for fun, almost" after he discovered that no online dating services were specifically designed for gamers.

MMODating premiered in June, so it's a little soon to boast any success stories (unless you're so unlucky in love that getting another human to sit through dinner with you qualifies as success). But, Villafrate says he knows at least a handful of people have met and dated as a result of his site.

The majority of MMODating's 2,500 members have posted personal profiles, and though the service is clearly in its infancy, its popularity has already blown Villafrate's expectations. "I thought it was a decent idea," he says, "but I never thought it was going to take off like this. We've already had to upgrade the server we put it on."

The male-to-female ratio at the close of its first month was about 80 to 20 percent, a gap Villafrate hopes to narrow with advertising on web sites geared toward women. As for the members he's attracted so far, most are American college students, but they span every age group and live as far away as Chile and Japan.

"Obviously, everyone has the stereotypical gamer image—some 16 year old with glasses sitting in a basement somewhere," he says. "But if you go to the site, it's really just a lot of normal, average people that, if you saw them on the street, you would never be able to pick out that they play games."

The service is free, but gaining e-mail access to other members costs \$9.99 a month (the college-budget equivalent of 40 packs of ramen noodles). Members can upload pictures or video to accompany their profiles, plus the site features chat, instant messaging, and a ZIP-code locator.

Somewhere in his parents' basement, Cupid is taking aim.

What Would Jesus Play?

Hot on the sandal-clad heels of *The Passion of the Christ*, comes Digital Praise, a newly launched videogame company that specializes in Christian titles. Actually, the film and the developer have little in common; whereas the former was a gore-filled exercise in capitalism masked as religious zealotry, the content in Digital Praise's games, according to its web site, will promote "virtues and family values like cooperation, forgiveness, tolerance, and kindness, without the violence, hatred, horror, and sex that fills computer gaming today."

We at *SURGE* think many Bible stories would translate into great games. (No sacrilege intended, we have this idea for a *Frogger* mod where players navigate baby Moses in a basket across the Nile River, and don't get us started on the book of Revelations.) That's not what Digital Praise has in mind. At all.

Bill Bean, the company's VP of Marketing and Sales, says DP's upcoming teen titles won't be overtly religious experiences. "There's no scripture reference; there's no praying or anything else," he says. "I think that you can have a first-person shooter game that is engaging and fun, but doesn't involve blowing people up into tiny pieces."

The first two titles, based on the *Adventures in Odyssey* radio series, are due out this fall and are geared toward the 8-and-older crowd, but Bean says Digital Praise will target the teen market with the titles it plans to release in 2005.

Given the popularity of M-rated titles, it's hard to imagine



a hit game having no titillation factor whatsoever. Then again, considering the current, totally innocuous retro craze (see *Cashing In on the Classics* on page 8) and the mainstream's recent support of other Christian media—think (then resume forgetting about) *Evanescence*—Digital Praise's attempt to land its games in your console might not be a long shot at all.

"We're trying to have games that are fun to play that have a biblical truth woven into the fabric of the game," Bean says. "I don't care whether it's a Christian game or a mainstream game. If it's defined as a game, it's supposed to be fun." ☺

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Transform your controller into a wireless speakerphone with Nyko's SpeakerCom for Xbox Live.

This two-in-one speaker and microphone unit attaches to your Xbox Communicator module, letting you bully your online opponents without tying you down. Its wide-ranging mic lets everyone next to you join in on the trash-talking, yet is powerful enough to filter out ambient noises. We especially like that it draws power from the controller itself, so you don't have to worry about preserving battery life.

The mic requires no setup and works with any first- or third-party dual-port Xbox controller. The only downside is that if you're getting owned by a 12-year-old from Ohio, now your roommates will know about it.

■ Nyko; \$24; www.nyko.com

Get Your Link On

We've put Bluetooth in our phones and Wi-Fi in our notebooks. Now Majesco is finally sharing the wireless wealth where we need it most—in our Game Boys. The Wireless Link for Game Boy brings wire-free combat to your Game Boy for the ultimate in head-to-head battles. Simply plug the Wireless Link into the back of your Game Boy and let the unit do the rest. It will actively search for other Wireless Links within range and then lock in with up to four different players.

Want to send a quick IM to one of your buddies? You can do that, too, with Majesco's Wireless Messenger, which uses radio waves to send quick messages to other Game Boys within your vicinity. A virtual keyboard appears onscreen, and because it uses radio signals, the service is free.

■ Majesco; \$29; www.majescogames.com



Wireless messenger

Hole in One

Don a polo shirt and visor, throw an 18-pack of beer in the cooler, and clear a walkable path in your apartment. The golf course is coming to your home, with QMotions' indoor, interactive golf simulator.

QMotions Golf brings the great lawn to your living room. The program lets you drive, chip, or putt, using your real golf clubs instead of a stationary keyboard. A tethered golf ball is mounted onto a specially designed swing arm that measures your swing speed and direction, factoring all this into EA Sports' *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2004* (included). Up to four players can play at once, and you can choose from up to 18 different courses.

■ QMotions; \$249; www.qmotions.com



Easy on the Eyes

If you've outgrown your bulky CRT, but aren't sure an LCD will deliver the same crisp picture, step this way. BenQ's new 17-inch LCD will convert even the biggest CRT snobs into LCD-loving gamers.

With its record-breaking 12-ms response time, the FP783 eliminates ghosting and lets you enjoy fast-paced games without the smearing effect known to plague most LCDs. Image quality is top of the line, thanks to its 500:1 contrast ratio, and the LCD's sci-fi inspired four-legged stand will keep your display steady. If you're looking to replace your enormous CRT with a midsize flat screen, this is the ideal candidate.

■ BenQ; \$589; www.benq.com

Wireless Wonders

Fed up with wireless controllers that stall in the middle of your game? So are we, which is why we love Intec's new 2.4-GHz wireless controllers. Because they operate on a higher frequency than most wireless controllers, these gamepads offer lag-free performance with no distraction from cordless phones or wireless networks. Up to 16 players can join in without any interference.

These controllers are slightly more compact than your typical controller and weigh a mere 9.6 ounces. Powered on two AA batteries, they give you up to 70 hours of gameplay up to 30 feet away from your console. All three units feature a vibration on/off switch.

Intec's wireless controllers are available for the GameCube, PS2, and Xbox.

■ Intec; \$29 to \$34; www.inteclink.com

Gadget Gumption

Nintendo has ruled the portable gaming arena for years, but that hasn't deterred competitors from jumping into the fray.

Gizmondo brings 64-bit gaming to the palm of your hand with its powerful 400-MHz ARM-based processor and a 2.8-inch TFT screen. The taco-shaped player touts an eight-way D-pad, along with two trigger buttons and four face buttons. Bluetooth connectivity will fuel multiplayer action, and the Gizmondo's games will come installed on SD cards. Alternatively, you'll be able to download them via the Internet. With the Sony PSP and Nintendo DS around the corner, the competition is stiff. The Gizmondo may end up as the little gadget that could.

■ Gizmondo; \$240; www.gizmondo.com

Keeping Score

Composers are showing that game scores have nothing to do with points.

In the beginning, there were linear games. Titles like *Spyhunter* were heralded for being utterly superfluous and for introducing a new electronic medium. By the mid-1980s (a decade that took to superfluous like no other), 8-bit soundtracks would try to complement a new era of gaming with an orchestral barrage of beeps and blips. They instead forever changed the way we sing in the shower.

It all started in 1985 with an infuriating calypso beat over synthed hip-hop drums. Written by Koji Kondo as a theme for the hugely popular *Super Mario Bros*, it quickly came to rank with coffee and crack as one of the world's most universally addictive substances. Almost 20 years later, DJs across the globe are conjuring sly remixes of the theme. Everyone, from the country band Nickel Creek to the Lucido Felice Quarter (a classical string quartet from Wisconsin), has waxed a take on the timeless theme.

Fun as the theme is, its ongoing popularity is symptomatic of the creative drain taking place in the gaming industry: Why haven't other videogames used music to solidify a title's foothold in pop culture? The two decades that followed never capitalized on the *Super Mario Bros* theme as a watershed moment for gaming, but that's about to change.

Today's gamers could be experiencing the first game music awakening. Armed with the latest technology and more money, a small group of composers are finding boundless possibilities in writing game scores, and this nascent musical movement in games is ready to explode into a whole new medium.

"When you think about all that *Mario* stuff, that was one thing. All of a sudden, composers from pop music got involved, and they were frustrated," says Nile Rodgers, best known for writing two of the 1980s' other most-enduring anthems—"Le Freak" and "Good Times"—with his band Chic. Since then, he has produced artists like David Bowie, Duran Duran, and Diana Ross. Lately he has been coordinating and distributing soundtracks for games like *Halo*, *Hitman*, and *Rise of Nations* through his company, Sumthing Distribution. "I remember when Trent Reznor (of Nine Inch Nails) did something (with *Quake*), he was expecting the same kind of bandwidth that he is accustomed to," says Rodgers. "It didn't turn out like that, but now it's really awesome with surround sound and new technology."

For a number of developers, usually larger ones like EA and Activision, it's easier to simply license a number of songs from other artists and compile a soundtrack of unoriginal work. EA's *NBA Live 2003* soundtrack, for example, is a collection of

Jesper Kyd

Photo: Michael Holm

uninspired tracks from established hip-hop artists. It is also the first game soundtrack to go platinum (1 million copies sold). Risk-taking companies, on the other hand, are trying to use a composer and orchestra to actually enhance gameplay.

"Music was always kind of an afterthought for every game. It was graphics, then gameplay," says Chris Vrenna, a founding member of Nine Inch Nails who collaborated with Reznor on the *Quake* soundtrack and who has since contributed music to American McGee's *Alice*, *Area 51*, and *Doom 3*. "The technology now allows it to be played back with CD quality. It's become a far more important element to the game."

Writers like Rodgers and Vrenna have greatly expanded the scope of game scores, and now even Hollywood heavyweights are getting into the act. Danny Elfman, best known for scoring films like *Men in Black*, *Batman*, and *Mission: Impossible*, as well as writing the theme song to *The Simpsons*, has composed the score for *Fable*, which will be distributed independently from the game by Rodgers' Sumthing Distribution. Elfman's presence lends serious artistic credibility to the title and makes it impossible to deny the growth of the game score medium as a whole.

One reason for the involvement of greater talents, other than the money, is the artistic freedom and boundless creativity that these projects afford. "Games are the most free thing I get to work on," says Vrenna. "The people working on the games come to me because they are looking for a specific thing that I do. I find it to be the most liberating thing."

While developers and composers champion the evolution of scoring games, they still cite an untapped potential. "The videogame budgets have become bigger, so of course the music budgets have become higher. But that doesn't really mean anything in terms of creativity," says Jesper Kyd, who has scored titles like *Hitman: Contracts*, *Freedom Fighters*, and *Brute Force*. "It just means people waste an incredible amount of money on some very mediocre music."

Kyd's point is legitimate; videogame scores, as a genre, have gone more than a decade without a serious influx of original music. The National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (NARAS) has acknowledged today's work, making game scores eligible for the Grammy Awards. Scores can now compete in categories like Best Score Soundtrack for a Motion Picture, Television, or Other Visual Media. There is even discussion of the NARAS giving game composers their own category. That category seems inevitable, as composers, many of whom are gamers to begin with, receive increasingly frequent and lucrative offers from publishers.

"Not only do I think it's one of the more important places for composers to work, but I also think that it is going to create an interesting new type of composer," says Rodgers. "I've structured my business in a way that I don't lose money doing game soundtracks, but I don't make money. I'm doing it because I really love it and I think that some of these composers are real geniuses."

"Hopefully, we'll get our own category for videogame soundtracks in the Grammys," says Kyd. "That's the next step. But, we still need to have some better quality scores, or people are not going to respect us."

In the last year the convergence of the musical score and the design of the game has become more seamless. According to Vrenna, a game's design and score directly influence each other. "They [designers] are working on the rest of the levels while they're hearing my music for the levels that are already there," he says. "So, our

finished music is now part of their CD stack on their desk."

If game scoring has anything going for it, it is that a number of the composers doing the work love games. That understanding will help catapult the musical scoring of videogames into its own uniquely artistic stratosphere. "Music still makes me high, and I've been doing this all my life," says Rodgers. "Now you kick in some kick-ass gameplay? Forget it, man. That shit is off the meter." ●



Chris Vrenna



Monolithic Proposal

With two highly anticipated titles in the works, Monolith may finally be ready to take its place amongst premier game developers.

You won't hear Samantha Ryan complain that she's one of few female employees at Monolith Productions. For starters, she's the CEO. Furthermore, the dynamics in place at the Kirkland, Washington-based game developer are finally producing profitable results. Why mess with success?

The company, which celebrates its tenth anniversary this year, now boasts more than 150 employees, and with titles like *F.E.A.R.* and *The Matrix Online* in the works, Monolith is aiming to reach the massive status implied by its name.

"We have the best lineup of products we've ever had," Ryan says. But success hasn't come without detours. Over its history, Monolith has operated as a game publisher, game developer, and even as a game engine-licensing company. The company's path to success may be unusual, but it's now well ensconced as one of the top developers of first-person action games on the PC.

Founded in 1994 by Jason Hall, a 6-foot, 6-inch former marine, Monolith started as a small developer, but soon became a boutique game publisher. It was a strategy born of necessity, not choice. "It's very difficult for an unknown

developer—no matter how talented they may be—to secure funding and game deals from risk-averse publishers," Ryan says. As a result, Monolith began working on several small games, including forgettable titles like the side-scrolling adventure *Captain Claw*. Its first major project, *SHOGO*, was an anime-inspired 3D action game, initially funded and eventually dropped by Microsoft. Monolith self-published *SHOGO*, which was powered by LithTech, the company's own 3D technology.

SHOGO was far from a smash hit, but that didn't stop Hall and his team from improving the engine technology over time. Soon, the company began work on other LithTech games, such as *Blood 2* for GT Interactive. Hall started licensing the LithTech engine to other developers, similar to how Epic Games licenses the Unreal engine. He secured a few deals, but LithTech never took off like the Unreal or Quake technology from id Software. By 2000, Monolith had revenues of about \$8 million a year, but it had yet to produce a blockbuster hit.

The company's fortunes changed with the November 2000 release of the first-person shooter *No One Lives Forever*. A cross between *James Bond* and *Austin Powers*, this 1960s-influenced spy thriller

The Matrix Online

told the story of secret agent Cate Archer. Chock-full of campy humor and varied gameplay, *No One Lives Forever* surprised many critics and consumers with its strong story line and polished presentation. Ryan says that game was a key turning point for Monolith. Two years later, the sequel arrived to similar praise.

Flush with success, Monolith beefed up its development efforts and eventually shed the engine-licensing business. Next came titles like *Aliens vs. Predator 2* for Fox/Vivendi and *TRON 2.0* for Disney. Monolith opted to sign each of its development teams to a different publisher, which was business as usual for the company. Ryan says going with multiple publishers has always been a deliberate strategic move. "If you have only one source of income and that source dries up, then you are suddenly trying to fund two or three teams in a multiproduct studio," she explains. "To avoid this, we always try to work with at least two publishers at any given time."

That strategy remains in place today. Monolith is currently working on two projects due in the next year. *F.E.A.R.*, a futuristic military shooter where players encounter paranormal activity at an aerospace facility, will arrive in 2005 from Vivendi Universal Games.

The other project, however, is a major departure: *The Matrix Online* is a massively multiplayer online game set inside the virtual world created by Larry and Andy Wachowski. It will be co-published this fall by Sega and Warner Brothers Interactive, the company headed by Monolith founder Jason Hall that recently purchased Monolith. Moving into massively multiplayer games is a dramatic change of direction for Monolith, but Ryan has hired veterans of the genre—such as *Asheron's Call* designer Toby Ragaini—to make sure the project delivers on its inherent potential.

Going forward, Ryan wants to keep Monolith's development teams busy with projects that play to the studio's strengths: compelling gameplay blended with rich storytelling. Monolith is considering moving beyond the PC to create an original console game.

With the buyout of Monolith by WB, questions are sure to rise about the loss of independence, but Ryan says the company isn't opposed to becoming part of a larger entity. "It doesn't matter to us if we are independent," says Ryan. "What matters most is that we're making great games."

F.E.A.R.



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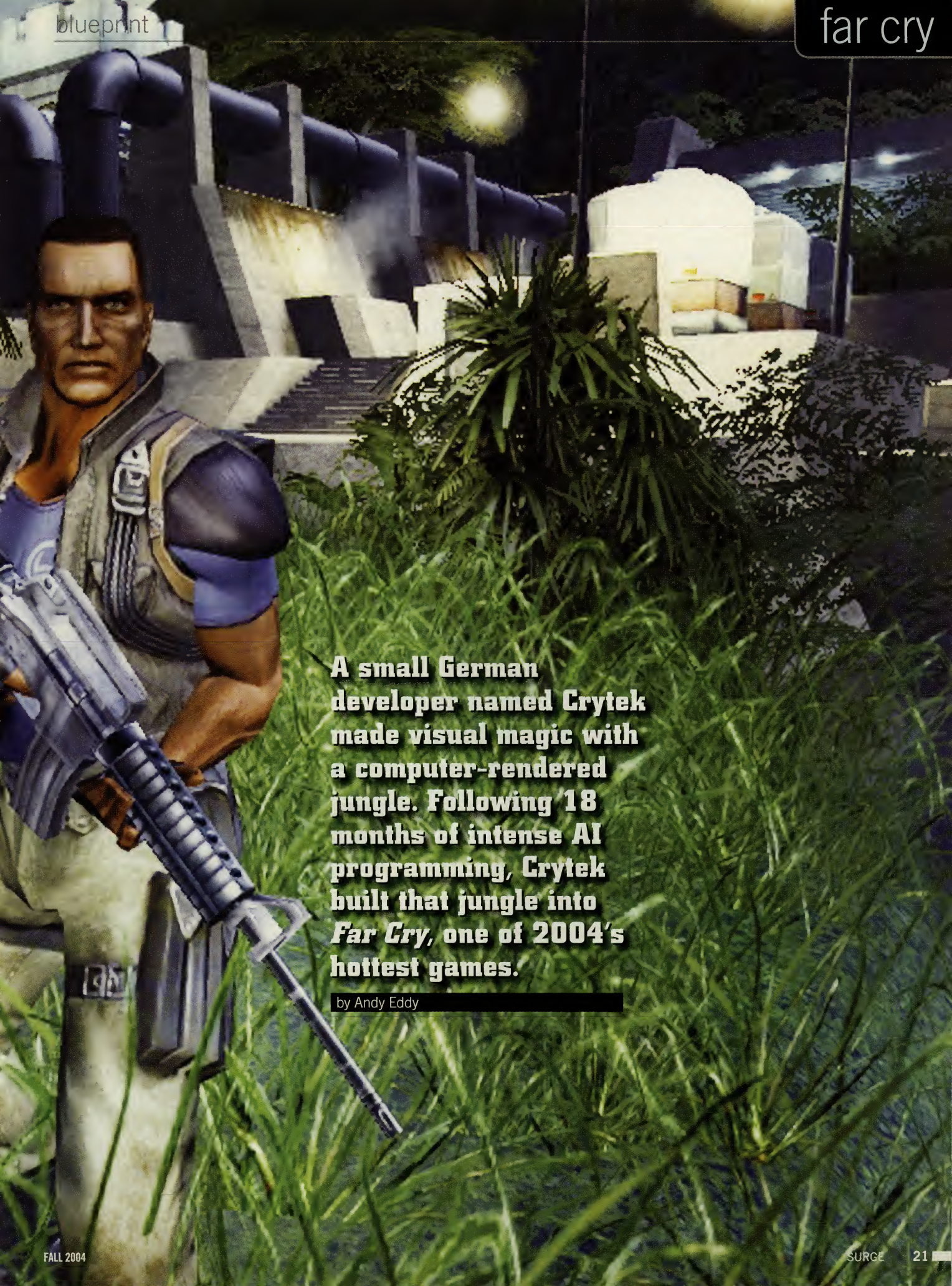


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IF AT FIRST YOU SUCCEEDED, CRY, CRY, AGAIN



A small German developer named Crytek made visual magic with a computer-rendered jungle. Following 18 months of intense AI programming, Crytek built that jungle into *Far Cry*, one of 2004's hottest games.

by Andy Eddy

Though sequels and franchises comprise more than 80 percent of the games in a given year, each year seems to hold some pleasant surprises. One of those games this year is Ubisoft's *Far Cry*, a *Dr. Moreau*-styled first-person shooter created by an unknown German developer, Crytek, located in Coburg. The most amazing part? This was Crytek's first attempt at making a game.

Prior to *Far Cry*, Crytek specialized in graphics engine technology, but its robust engine captured the imagination of Ubisoft, which signed the company to a contract after seeing a tech demo in 2001. Crytek's idea for a game was to create a first-person shooter in an open world that strayed from the typical formula of warehouse gunfights in claustrophobic spaces. Inspirations included *Predator*, *First Blood*, and a more than casual nod to *Frankenstein* and *The Island of Doctor Moreau*.

"The goal with *Far Cry* was to make a game that was more open than any other," says Cevat Yerli, Crytek's director for *Far Cry*. "I wanted to do

something opposite from what the competition was doing. [Every other game took place in] dark, closed interiors with scripted AI. I wanted [the] opposite: brightness, openness, and nonscripted AI."

The story of *Far Cry* follows Jack Carver, a retired military man who has been hired by journalist Valerie Constantine to navigate through a series of tropical islands she is investigating. All is going well until their boat is attacked and Valerie disappears. After waking up on an island, it's up to Jack to find out why they were attacked, where Valerie is, what she's really doing on these islands, and what those growls coming from the heart of the jungle are.

Brains and Brawn

Crytek's initial goal with *Far Cry* was to put together a test version of multiplayer action similar to other shooters of the period, but set in what would typically be known as paradise, sans the mercenaries and genetic experiments gone awry.





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AND NONSCRIPTED AI."**

—CEVAT YERLI





"Back then, *Quake III* and *Unreal Tournament* were the big things," Yerli says, "so we made sort of a simulation of that gameplay, but outdoors in multiplayer, just to get an idea of whether we can pull off a multiplayer game."

The multiplayer element was more than sufficient, and the developer shifted its focus on the single-player gameplay. Crytek felt that a good single-player experience would be key to the game's success, and to accomplish a great blend of challenge and entertainment, it needed strong AI, which meant no scripts. Rather than relying on a series of fixed rules that would make the gameplay redundant and predictable, the computer-controlled characters would be autonomous. With nonscripted AI, the game's design became more realistic, with enemies that might hide behind a tree on one play-through and head toward the player with guns blazing in the next.

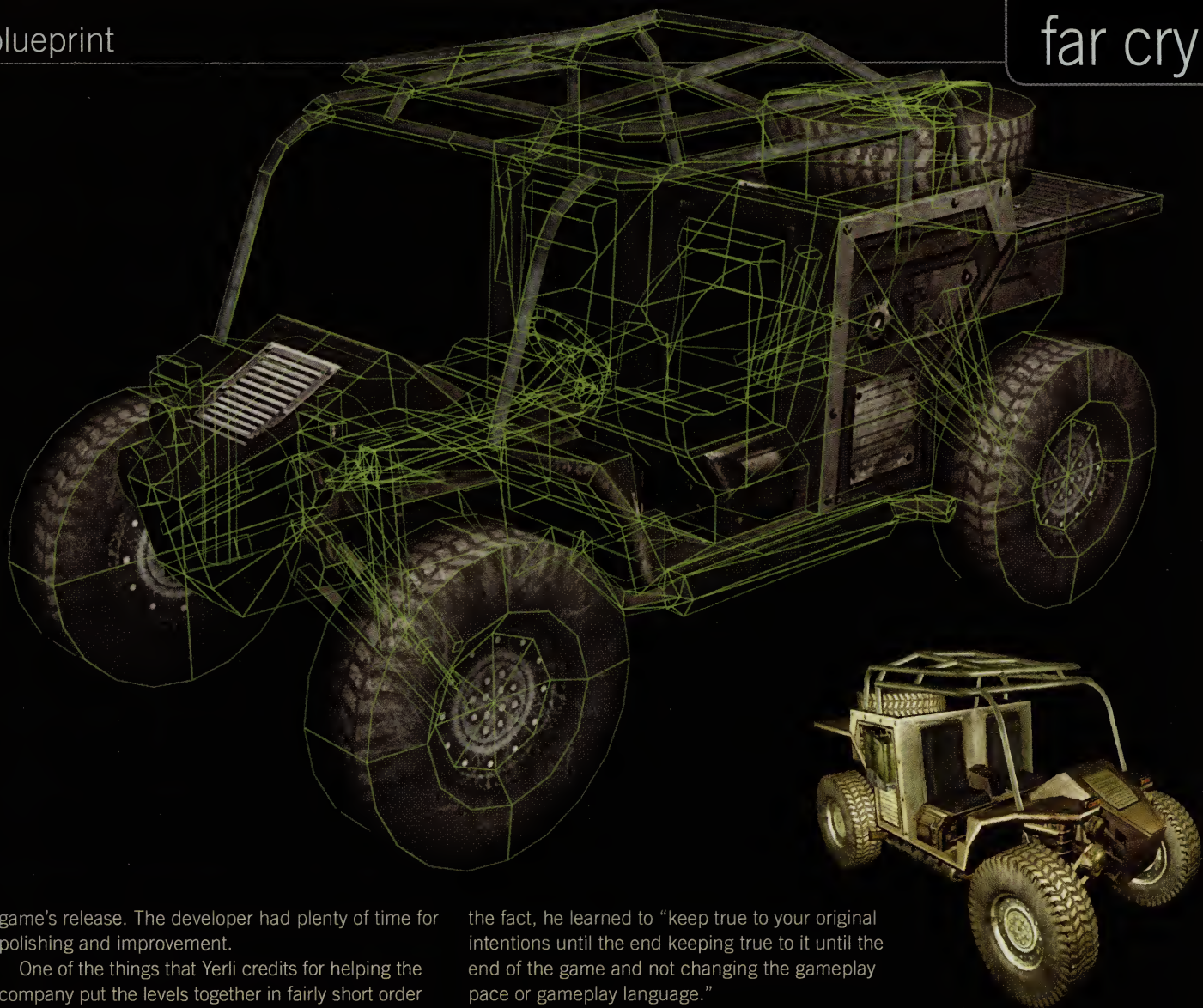
The nonscripted AI was a risk, and after more than a year of facing computer-controlled characters with "dumb behavior or animation that didn't look right," Yerli and company thought they would have to introduce scripts, a compromise that would have made *Far Cry* a far different game than the one that players and the press have been raving about.

After giving the staff one more month to make the game work with nonscripted AI, Crytek was finally happy with what it saw. It took 18 months in all, but Yerli says the developers achieved AI that sets *Far Cry* apart from other games in the same genre, which was their original goal.

Ubisoft's Cord Smith says everybody involved in the project approached it with an open-ended slant because the engine itself allowed for that at the beginning. "I think there were a lot of problems posed from the fact that the game world could be so vast and open-ended," he says, "but a lot of the mechanics, including the AI itself, Crytek had to design as a result, and [that] ended up in their advantage. It was a game that became unique because of those challenges."

"My favorite part is sneaking up on mercs and listening to them talk and speculate about *you*," he continues. "That's a great tool to immerse the players and make them feel like they're Jack Carver. They're one guy effecting all this chaos on this island."

From that point on, Yerli says, the goal was to complete all of the levels as a playable game, "where pretty much everything was functional and done, and you could play the game from beginning to the end. There were placeholders, but you could finish, and you could get the whole experience, [which was] a big, big moment for our company." Crytek hit that objective in October 2003, about 6 months before the



game's release. The developer had plenty of time for polishing and improvement.

One of the things that Yerli credits for helping the company put the levels together in fairly short order is that designers could test the gameplay from within the editing tools instead of booting up a build of the game. It was a more efficient process, and Yerli claims that it minimized the time needed to train level designers on the tools.

Upgrades and Downsides

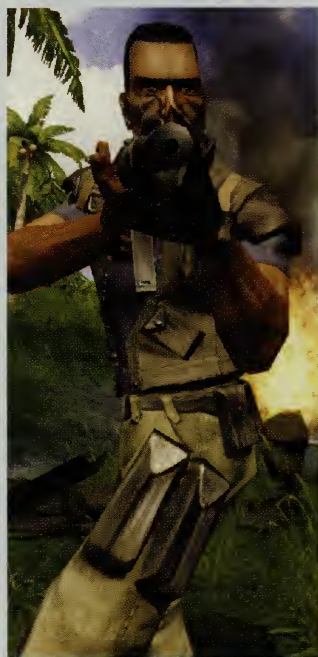
The Crytek team took a lot away from the experience of making *Far Cry*. Some of the criticisms and shortcomings continue to be addressed through patches. For instance, Yerli admits that the erratic and arbitrary locations of save points was a "design flaw," but one that may be patched by the time you read this article. He's proud of the fact that Crytek continues to support the game by upgrading its graphics to support newer video cards.

Other ideas that aren't suited to a quick fix through patching are filed away for future projects. Yerli says that the use of celebrities as voice-acting talent is definitely in the cards for its forthcoming projects. He notes that, closer to the end of *Far Cry*, having the player face a wealth of rocket launchers, which provided more brute force than cunning enemy strategy, ended up not being the best design decision. He had hoped that it would ramp up the tempo and difficulty of the game, but says that after

the fact, he learned to "keep true to your original intentions until the end keeping true to it until the end of the game and not changing the gameplay pace or gameplay language."

"The player, when he plays a game," Yerli explains, "learns the certain language of the game: He understands how the game's proceeding, how the game is played, how the game is actually offering challenge, and, in a sense, he can anticipate gameplay. If you change the pace or the language, and you do something wrong, then the player will feel tricked. And that happened in *Far Cry*."





In the end, *Far Cry* was a successful project, one that was well-received and that put Crytek on the map. "I wouldn't say it was a *Far Cry* success," Yerli says. "I would say it was a Crytek success, because the challenge we had was beyond the game side. We were a starting company."

"Naturally, the funding was pretty limited, and we had to hire all these people. So, my task was to make sure that we had our production smarter than the traditional way of doing it. We don't have time to ship two or three titles; we have to ship this one title, and it must be a hit. Failing in this case was seriously a very little option," he says, laughing. "So we didn't want to fail."

Cry for the Future

Of course, it doesn't stop there. The risk that Crytek and Ubisoft took together panned out, but their success has moved *Far Cry* from an experiment to a viable franchise. At this point, though, there's little that the parties will say about what the future holds.

In the immediate future, *Far Cry Instincts*, the inevitable console take, is set for release in first-quarter 2005 on Xbox and PS2. The game is being developed by Ubisoft's Montreal studio, with Crytek monitoring the game to ensure that it stays true to the PC original.

"It's meant to be a port of the PC experience," Smith explains. "There are a lot of things that have been retooled to take advantage of what comes with a console and what you lose with PC coming to console. I guess a 'director's cut' is the right way to say it. A lot of it has been redesigned; the core story is there, the core characters are there, the core progression and the core atmosphere and feel, but there are a lot of elements that are being added to enhance it."

Frederic Comdolo, the lead programmer on the Xbox version of *Far Cry Instincts* at Ubisoft Montreal, says, "We want to keep the same spirit concerning the gameplay. We tried to have more features—more vehicles and so on—and put some new faces on what people loved in the PC game."

Comdolo says that since people already think highly of the original, the Xbox team is making its additions carefully. "It's quite hard to say, 'What do you want to change?'"

Among the additions and changes will be more vehicles, such as hovercraft and Jet Ski-like watercraft; more weapons, such as a harpoon gun; and different tactics that players can use throughout the course of the game. These include the ability to set traps and make Carver roll onto his back when prone, so he can fire a weapon up at enemies through the floor boards.

While graphics will certainly take a downgrade, given the consoles' meager power compared to a loaded PC, Smith claims some radical changes in *Far Cry*



A Little Isle of View

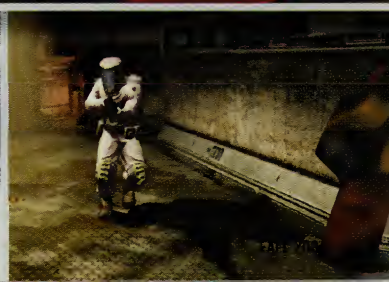
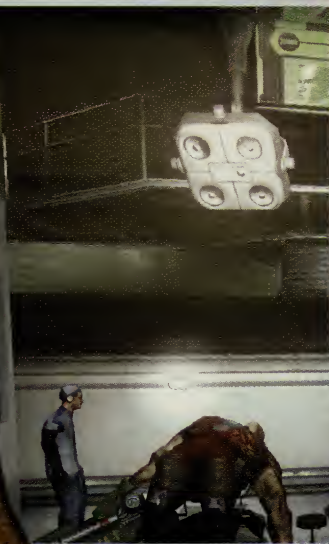
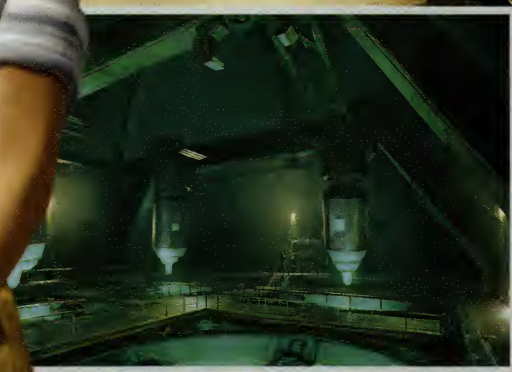
Unlike some developers that cut their teeth on independent projects or game conversions, Crytek's past was all in engine technology. Graphics-chip maker Nvidia used Crytek's "X-Isle" technology demo to show off the capabilities of the GeForce2 Ultra chip.

"X-Isle was a technology demo with dinosaurs. The idea was to showcase that we were experts in bump-mapping and open-ended games," says Cevat Yerli, director at Crytek for *Far Cry* and its proprietary CryEngine. "It started with open terrain with nothing, then we added trees and a little vegetation, and later on we added dinosaurs to it, which was the balance of the bump-mapping."

Nvidia backed Crytek's work on a followup demo, titled "X-Isle: Dinosaur Island," for the GeForce 3 processor. Those funds helped get the *Far Cry* project moving. With the work on "X-Isle" as the foundation, Crytek talked to a number of publishers, finally settling on Ubisoft. The two signed a deal in January 2001.

"I think [Ubisoft] saw the tech as a way to really launch a title that would be—at least, graphically—head and heels above the competition," says Cord Smith, *Far Cry*'s brand manager at Ubisoft. "In terms of launching a new brand, it needed to have some kind of hook there that caught people's attention, and with *Far Cry*, from the very beginning it was expected to be launched as a triple-A brand."







Instincts will further immerse the player in the action. For instance, all the cut-scenes will be played out from a first-person perspective, including the opening scene when Carver's boat is attacked. The Montreal team will apply some graphics nuances to make the experience more realistic. These will include glimmers of sunlight coming through a thatched roof (reminiscent of the light shining on *Splinter Cell*'s Sam Fisher through the slats of window blinds), as well as momentary blurriness when the player surfaces from underwater.

If there are any deficiencies in the graphics department, a robust multiplayer component will likely offset them. Ubisoft plans to include a "sandbox editor," so players can craft their own levels in the *Far Cry Instincts* universe.

Meanwhile, for Crytek, the future is less defined, at least publicly. Yerli indicates that the company is working with Electronic Arts for its next project, another first-person shooter—one he expects will also push the envelope.

"With *FC*," Yerli says, "We learned. It was our apprenticeship. Let's face the fact that *Far Cry* was done by a team [80 percent of which] never shipped or developed a commercial game in their entire career. That raw but extremely talented team, with a strong design, no fear, and a lot of hunger to learn, coupled with the right decision in technology, design, and production processes and tools, made *Far Cry* an effectively developed, cutting-edge and innovative reference FPS game—yet it was our first. With our next game, we do not plan to stay where we are; it's the opposite: We want to strive for [the] next levels of innovations, plus go beyond what we think will happen, push so hard that finally we show a masterpiece FPS representing the true potential of Crytek."

From that, it seems Crytek is looking to make a game that's a far cry from what it's already accomplished. ☞



The uncannily smart soldier AI was nicely complemented by the sheer brute force of the Trigen army, both of which made *Far Cry* the first must-play FPS of 2004

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25 to Life

The Martha Stewart story

Publisher
Eidos

Developer
Avalanche Software

Genre
Action

Release Date
2005

PS2 | Xbox

Cops and robbers: a simple game with simple rules that has inspired toddler violence since the moment cowboys and Indians started to seem played out. Eidos, which is also exploring a more urban slant with *Get on Da Mic*, showcases the grit behind that basic urban aesthetic in *25 to Life*, a tactical play for *Grand Theft Auto*'s golden uzi. In the end, who really wants to play house or doctor when you can play cops and robbers?

This gritty, third-person street war is set in modern day cities. Playing as either cops or gangsters, you'll need to slowly climb the ranks among your peers until the day you eventually rule the streets. That gameplay is geared toward what will ultimately be the more popular gangster mode, where you'll be given ample opportunity to bust out of prison after you've been arrested. The undercover cop's missions, which include infiltrating the drug lord's mansion, aren't any

less action-packed. Throw in online multiplayer supporting up to 16 players, and you've got a title that stands on its own two glocks.

The immersive and ultraviolent missions make full use of the sprawling, interactive urban environment that Eidos gives you. Car alarms, barking dogs, and the odd drive-by make *25 to Life* as close to the hood as most of you are ever going to get. Fully customizable characters up the replay ante, as does the points system, which allows you to compare stats with your buds. Your arsenal is robust; both lethal and nonlethal weapons will be going off constantly, their impact amplified by a bumping hip-hop soundtrack. This game could become popular in many a suburban home because, in case you haven't heard, suburbs are the new ghetto.

—Tal Pinchevsky



BloodRayne 2

The vampy tramp is back

Publisher
Majesco

Developer
Terminal Reality

Genre
Action

Release Date
October

PC | PS2 | Xbox

There's no shame in admitting you bought the first *BloodRayne* because you were attracted to the sexy thing on the cover; it's hard to resist a vampiric saucebox who has a thing for killing Nazis. Maybe you were so disappointed by the

movie *Underworld* that you needed an elixir to fill the void. We got roped in, too, and like you, we found *BloodRayne* interesting for a few hours before selling it to the local Gamestop.

Agent BloodRayne is back. She sucks again (and won't let go), but in a good way. We last saw her defending mankind from a crazy, supernatural Nazi—hey, we didn't write this stuff. Fast-forward several decades to modern times, where she continues to fight her evil father's other Dhampir (that's offspring produced by vampire rape—use it often). They've created the Cult of Kagan to continue their father's plans for vampire dominance; this includes unleashing "the Shroud," which would

immunize vampires against sunlight and allow them to wreak havoc on humans 24/7. BloodRayne's mission, of course, is to stop them.

Returning damn sexier than ever, BloodRayne's skills are deadlier, too. She can make 30 different combos during melee battle and 12 finishing moves, like Stab and Behead, that redefine how one's blood should be sucked. BloodRayne is quick, and her body swishes and swooshes smoothly, like silk. In other words, the graphics and animations have vastly improved.

During her time off, she's picked up some acrobatic skills; she can do things on a pole that would make the ladies at Scores jealous. BloodRayne's harpoon gets an upgrade, too. She can shoot and pull objects toward enemies, as well as stab them and pull them out of her path. The controls are remapped for better melee combat, new powers, and devastating Blood Rage attacks. She must solve puzzles—horrifically—to get out of certain situations. BloodRayne can gain experience points, and before we forget, there are lots of guns for double-fisting. (What girl doesn't like cool toys?) With these major changes, this may be a keeper.

—Les Shu



Brothers in Arms

Because Nazis are A-holes

Publisher Ubisoft
Developer Gearbox Software
Genre FPS
Release Date 2005

PC | PS2 | Xbox

Tell us if you've heard this one before. A fun and tactical series of missions set during World War II pits you and your squad against the evil Axis. We know: been there, done that. We were initially wary of hearing about Ubisoft's upcoming *Brothers in Arms* title, particularly with *Call of Duty* and *Medal of Honor* having set some fairly lofty precedents. Fortunately, Ubisoft is making an effort to put a dash of innovation in this title, and that doesn't involve a switch of setting to Korea or Vietnam or even Grenada.

Gearbox, whose design team includes some of the people behind *James Bond: Nightfire* and the *Halo* port to PC, has gone to valiant extremes to make this title as militarily authentic as possible, casting 20 unique soldiers, each with his own unique facial features and personality. Everything from the war-torn towns' dirt roads to the enemy's last German words have been surveyed by historians and veterans for validity.

Set during the famous airdrop preceding the epic Battle of Normandy, the game casts you as Sgt. Matt Baker, a squad leader in the 101st airborne paratrooper division. As you and your troops scatter over the French countryside, you must balance the well-being of your soldiers against the eventual success of your mission. Navigating three-man AIs throughout the countryside is an interesting development similar to *Full Spectrum Warrior*, but you still have control of your own gun.

In a way, the WWII game market is almost as treacherous as 1940s war-torn Europe itself. Infiltrating the area is hard enough, but *Brothers in Arms* is different enough to warrant a look.

—TP



Dead to Rights II: Hell to Pay

Turner & Hooch, with explosions



Publisher
Namco

Developer
Namco

Genre
Action

Release Date
Early 2005

PS2 | Xbox

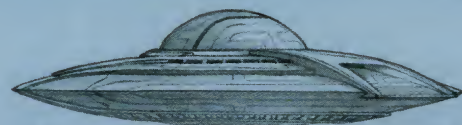
Scuffed-up action hero Jack Slate returns to once again rid the Grant City streets of crime and corruption. Though he thought he'd left the godforsaken hole for good, he returns, with his canine sidekick Shadow in tow, to address the plight of a lady friend. How touching. The result is a hard-boiled Hong Kong action romp with enough film noir influence to make Raymond Chandler blush.

While its settings and action remain incredibly dark and intense, its improved fighting engine has sprayed a little angel dust on this title. With 25 new disarm moves, better interaction with Shadow, more interactive environments, and a new array of overpowering weapons, Slater is ready for whatever the city gives him. As you progress through the game, the fights with enemies and bosses will dramatically increase in scope, leading to all-out battles destructive enough to level entire city blocks.

The true appeal of a title like *Dead to Rights II* is its inherent darkness. You're never convinced that Jack is any less evil than the thugs he's beating up, but that gray area embodies a lot of the story's appeal. What you see is what you get: an unadulterated rager of an action title, with a nasty dog, to boot. Do you really need landmines and other assorted heavy artillery to clean up a corrupt city? Probably not, but that's why we're stoked for this one.

—TP





Destroy All Humans!

To probe or not to probe

Publisher
THQ

Developer
Pandemic Studios

Genre
Action

Release Date
Early 2005

PS2 | Xbox

In a seemingly original premise that lies somewhere between *Mars Attacks!* and *War of the Worlds*, *Destroy All Humans!* drops you into the bulbous head of Crypto, a visiting alien of the Furon race who is bent on learning a thing or two about the human species before obliterating it outright. Slightly reminiscent of characters from *Spaced Invaders* (remember that movie? We hope not.), the backdrop is 1950s Middle America—a time of gumdrops, pigtails, and songs with lyrics like “Sha la-la-la-boom.”

After being dropped in a corn field, your first few missions will involve heavy surveillance and reconnaissance: Learn more about the calcium-bearing earth creatures who moo so incessantly; decipher the “yee haws” and “dang gollys” of the barefoot, bearded one who chases you with his three-pronged spear. Of course, you could just start vaporizing, but your mission on Earth is to learn. Become familiar with their customs and soon enough it will all be yours.

Using a variety of mind-control and cloning

techniques, you will stealthily navigate through the rich environments, slowly infiltrating the ranks of Mayberry's finest. All the human characters in *DAH!* demonstrate impressive AI, and you can somehow involve all of them in your plans for world domination, whether it's assuming their identity to gain access to heavily guarded buildings or brainwashing them in order to cause a diversion. A lot of this game involves a little abstract thought, almost as if it's a puzzle using humans as pieces. It's not quite playing God, but it's just as ambitious.

If you lack the patience such thought requires, you can go out with your futuristic weapons blazing, immediately blowing your cover. Of course, with the great weapons at your disposal, including a vaporizer and a tool that emits sonic booms, you might have more fun discarding the stealth approach altogether. But remember, the game is about abduction, so warm up them probing gloves.

—TP



Geist

Don't worry, no Patrick Swayze

Publisher
Nintendo

Developer
n-Space

Genre
FPS

Release Date
Winter

GCN



In most games, supernatural beings and ghosts are the baddies we battle. Nintendo turns the tables in *Geist*, in which *the players* are phantoms raising the willies out of people.

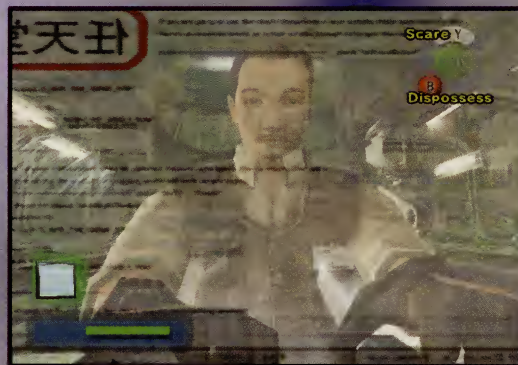
You are John Raimi, a wandering poltergeist with the ability to possess humans, animals, and objects. Raimi must uncover how he became this way. A government disease-control agent, he was sent to covertly investigate a shady corporation, only to be captured and have his spirit ripped from his body after the operation goes sour. Raimi haunts the corporation, determined to reunite with his body and uncover the secrets of the corporation.

The game begins with you as a ghost, and you must possess and de-possess in order to advance to different rooms. In spirit form, you move fast, are invisible, and can float through cracks and fences, but you can go only so far; much of the corporation is locked down with heavy doors. In one scene, you possess a temperature valve to overheat the pipes, which draws the attention of a guard. Scare the guard, and you can possess his body in order to enter new rooms (his memories get you where you need to go) and kill off other guards with his weapon. Or, you can scare and possess a dog to get through tight spaces. Some scenes require you to possess multiple bodies, so you must act fast or you'll find yourself trapped.

As a ghost, you have a life meter, as you're a partially living being, of sorts. While it's easy to possess bodies and blow your way out, much of the game involves stealth and strategy.

Geist is graphically satisfying, and offers an interesting mix of FPS and strategy. The included multiplayer component can accommodate up to four players. There's a chance all this possession business might become too repetitive, but we're hoping there are enough surprises in store to make us remember why we bought the Cube.

—LS



Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas

Gin, juice sold separately

Publisher
Rockstar Games

Developer
Rockstar North

Genre
Action

Release Date
October 18

PS2

Parents are locking their kids in the attic. Families are boarding up their windows. City schools are installing new metal detectors. John Ashcroft is mobilizing his morality squad in spades. It can only mean one thing.

The latest *Grand Theft*

Auto title is about to corrupt the youth of America. Awesome!

It's the early 1990s. Our protagonist Carl Johnson (that's you) returns to his beloved hometown of Los Santos, San Andreas, a city overrun by gang violence and drugs. That's just the beginning of your bad day. Some dirty cops have framed you for murder, your old friends are stumbling into oblivion, your mama's dead, and your girl left you for one of MC Hammer's dancers. Okay, maybe that last part doesn't happen.

Either way, you need to navigate Los Santos, San Fierro, and Las Venturás, which are basically mock replicas of Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Las Vegas, respectively.

The setting is right out of films like *Boyz n the Hood* and *Menace II Society*, which means the balance between hunter and hunted is tedious at best. Expect plenty of gangsta rap to be blaring from the areas' lowriders, and don't be surprised if an Eazy-E clone, complete with sunglasses, Raiders cap, and Jerry curl, suddenly starts to step to you. As Rockstar did with *Vice City*, it will likely roll out a



solid soundtrack with this game. Its 1990s setting is as authentic as you'll find anywhere.

Trying to build on its previous smash titles, the developer looks like it might have the *GTA* to end all gratuitously violent action games. With sprawling levels that absolutely dwarf *Liberty City* and *Vice City*, not to mention the new hood-rich motif, this is the fun game that is going to render American society an amoral cesspool of drive-bys and pencil-thin moustaches. We can't wait.

—TP



Killzone

I see dead people

Publisher
SCEA

Developer
Guerrilla Games

Genre
FPS

Release Date
November

PS2

Interplanetary first-person battles for the console that aren't named *Halo*? Where have these been? As the ISA battalion in *Killzone*, you'll navigate a four-person squad through a variety of levels occupying roughly 11 environments. That's *a lot* of killing, my friend.

Each of the members of your crew will bring a different skill set to the table. You'll enjoy the services of Templar the commando, Luger the assassin, Rico the heavy weapons specialist (we suspect he listens to a lot of heavy metal), and Hakka, a recently-defected spy who may or may not be from Finland.

All the levels provide a distinct postapocalyptic atmosphere for you to peruse and eventually blow up. That means vivid, dark environments filled with totalitarian atmosphere. Different scenarios call for specific characters, and your 27 weapons make *Killzone* an all-out, oblivion-inducing shooter.

We know what you'll be saying: Yes, everything so pretty when it go boom boom. You'll likely need to think more multilaterally to get far in *Killzone*. Guerrilla has included a number of fun animated intangibles; each weapon appears to have its own unique futuristic animation, and everything in this title moves with a sort of manic fluidity. Throw in plenty of requisite shadows and strong levels of detail, and this game is almost as much fun to watch as it is to play.

Killzone will have a multiplayer split screen, and it supports 12-player online multiplayer, allowing you to share the carnage with your friends. With its multiplayer, missions, and environments, this shooter may have some serious legs on it. Anything else with legs in this game, however, should be shot on the spot.

—TP



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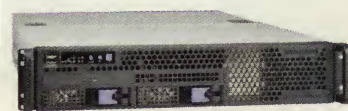


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Star Wars Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords

For being all-powerful, the Jedi sure do need a lot of saving

Publisher
LucasArts

Developer
Obsidian
Entertainment

Genre
RPG

Release Date
Winter

PC | Xbox

After the great successes of LucasArts' award-winning title *Knights of the Old Republic*, a sequel was a welcome inevitability.

Set five years after the tumultuous end of the first game, *The Sith Lords* finds the universe in a state of disarray, where the Sith have virtually eliminated the Jedi, and the Republic is crumbling under the weight of galactic quarrels. Instead of picking up the action as your character from the first game, you assume the role of an exiled, amnesiac Jedi who must resurrect the Jedi Order—even though you start the game with no Force powers or lightsaber.

Since the first game offered multiple endings,

Sith Lords lets you tell the people you meet what you remember about Darth Revan and his shady disappearance, so your new game experience will jive with the original *KOTOR*. Once again, your moral choices will determine the direction of the universe as you proceed in your quest.

Most of the gameplay remains unchanged. Developers Obsidian Entertainment clearly felt the BioWare engine needed only a few tweaks to enhance the player experience. Now, instead of seeing the same combat animations every time you strike an enemy, your experience and skill level will trigger new animations that truly convey your deadliness and power.

You'll run into familiar faces from the first game, but droids are the only recurring characters that will join your party. In *Sith Lords*, your moral decisions will weigh more heavily on your party members than in *KOTOR*, as their Force alignments may cause interparty quarrels and confrontations, depending on your path.

Since so many of your party members ended up sitting on your ship while you saved (or destroyed) the universe in *KOTOR*, Obsidian will take a cue from the original *Star Wars* universe and split up your party to tackle two tasks at once. This will force players to balance their parties with a healthy selection of lightsabers, blasters, and droids to





complete missions (instead of just running through the game with a posse of unstoppable Jedi) and let you spend more time with each of the characters.

The character classes will be the same as the first game, but Obsidian has added six prestige Jedi classes (three Light, three Dark) for experienced characters and 60 new feats and Force powers like Force Sight, Force Clairvoyance, and Force Rage.

The only bad news about *Sith Lords* is the release date: We have to wait until late 2004, and possibly early 2005, to flex our Jedi might.

—Matt Bertz



Metroid Prime 2 Echoes

Good Samus, meet evil Samus

Publisher
Nintendo

Developer
Retro Studios

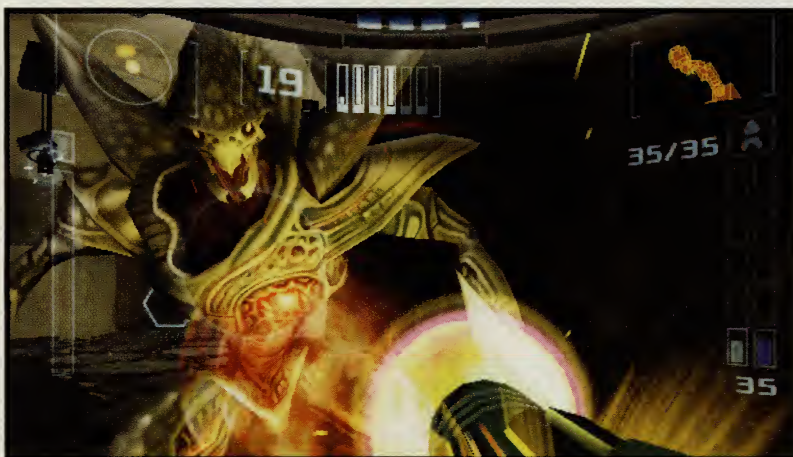
Genre
FPS

Release Date
November 15

GCN

Poor Samus. Exploring deep space can be so lonely. There's no time to make friends when you're busy surveying enemy territory and abandoned worlds. That's the sacrifice that comes with making the big bucks and accepting dangerous assignments as a bounty hunter. But that's going to change, because in this *Metroid Prime* sequel, everybody is looking for Samus, and friendship is not in the plans.

Echoes finds our heroine on the planet Aether. Her mission is to locate and assist a lost squad of Federation soldiers. A seemingly simple task reveals that the planet is embroiled in a war between light and dark. After Samus crash lands on the surface—her ship suffers damage during an electrical storm—she discovers a massacre scene and is subsequently attacked by dark beings called the Ing Horde, who strip her suit of its powers.



Samus discovers that the Ing Horde is attempting to annihilate the beings of the light world, the Luminon, and turn Aether completely dark. The Luminon ask Samus to enter the dark world and stop the Ing Horde. In Dark Aether, enemies abound. Samus will discover her doppelgänger, an enemy of striking resemblance with many darker powers.

Don't let the screenshots fool you. Although the controls and graphics are identical to the first game, *Echoes* is a souped-up sequel. The graphics are highly detailed, and the environments have a dark, sinister look to them. Enemy AI is smarter; they will bop around to avoid your fire. In addition to missiles, the charge beam, and morph ball, Samus can add new power-ups and missile combos (multitargets), as well as weapons designed for the light and dark worlds. As in the first, she will need to use her scan visor to locate hidden switches and enemy weaknesses.

Once she enters the dark world, Samus will need to find a way to survive, as her suit won't protect her from the environment. There are morph ball puzzles to solve and—a first—a multiplayer game between four players, which makes the lack of online functionality on the Cube that much more frustrating.

—LS

Pariah

Not to be confused with *Glitter* sensation Mariah

Publisher	Groove Games
Developer	Digital Extremes
Genre	Action
Release Date	2005
PC Xbox	

Jack Mason, a burned-out military doctor, is having a very bad day. He's been called in on the routine transport of a sick prisoner—one Karina J., who is infected with a mysterious virus. The transport, which was supposed to escort the prisoner off the planet, gets shot down, leaving Jack stranded with her in the wastelands. And, he's just learned he has 16 hours to figure out what's going on before a thermonuclear biohazard-containment protocol activates. Welcome to the hard-knock world of *Pariah*, the upcoming first-person shooter from Digital Extremes.

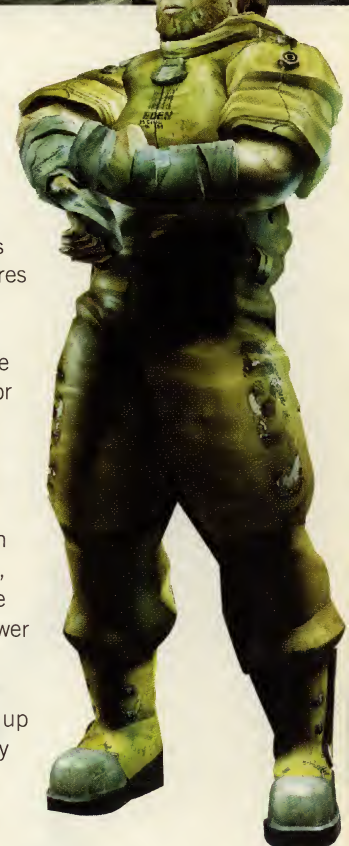
Pariah marks a new style of game for Digital Extremes, best known for its contribution to the multiplayer *Unreal Tournament* franchise. *Pariah* will feature an immersive, single-player story to complement DE's trademark fragfest action. Putting you in the shoes of the good doctor, gameplay will be a mixture of run-and-gun shooter fare and more strategic, survival elements. Building on the solid foundation of *Unreal* technology, DE has tweaked the engine with a little help from the *Havok* physics engine and modified the already robust AI to work in a single-player setting. Enemies will react to the world around them, allowing you to try a stealthier approach in some situations or fight strategically by taking out a group's leader to reduce their combat



effectiveness.

Weapon customization will further allow you to choose how you want to play. Collectable upgrades called Weapon Energy Cores add a mild RPG element to the game, granting improved functionality, like different types of ammo for the grenade launcher or allowing the healing tool to resuscitate fallen allies. A tweaks menu will allow you to slightly modify each weapon in four categories, which means you can give your assault rifle more power at the expense of its firing rate. With all that, plus six different vehicles to spice up the fun, *Pariah* is definitely one to keep an eye on when its spring 2005 release date rolls around.

—Adam Fleet





Prince of Persia: Warrior Within

Can the prince become a king?

Publisher
Ubisoft

Developer
Ubisoft Montreal

Genre
Action

Release Date
November 15

GCN | PC | PS2 | Xbox



Yes, the Prince is back, and we're not talking about that weirdo who used to be a symbol. In its followup to the critically acclaimed *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time*, Ubisoft Montreal has added some breadth to the *Prince of Persia* franchise, which is really saying something, considering how thoroughly everyone raved about *Sands*. For one thing, the Prince is a little wiser and weathered. This Prince appears a bit darker and more intriguing as a character. We suspect he has more of an ax to grind, which would, of course, explain the change in his weapons.

The Prince can now wield two swords instead of one. That's not the only upped ante in the battle scenes. The fighting engine is significantly faster, so much so that it should take some getting used to its

frenetic pace. You'll be using your magic dagger for time travel, as well as the many other purposes that made it so useful.

The plot of this new title is veiled in a bit of mystery, as an unstoppable force known as Dahaka tracks you down to commit an act so dastardly, so maniacal, so malicious... Actually we have no clue what it is. But the signature gameplay is intact, requiring you to time certain attacks just so. You'll have fantastic mobility as the Prince, and even if you're surrounded by a harem of Akbars and Alis, a few incredibly slick moves should take you out of harm's way. As reticent as we are to embrace sequels (there's just too damn many), this title might actually build on the original.

—TP



Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory

Sam Fisher: better than most ninjas



Publisher
Ubisoft

Developer
Ubisoft

Genre
Stealth Action

Release Date
Winter

PC | Xbox

Nothing was broken the last time we saw Sam Fisher, so little has been fixed in this third installment of the *Splinter Cell* saga. This time around, Fisher investigates information-warfare attacks that threaten to spiral Japan, China, and Korea into a bloody, open conflict.

Fans of the previous *Splinter Cells* will see a great deal that is familiar. Fisher uses all his fancy gizmos and natural ninja-like ability to avoid and incapacitate a lineup of thugs, mercs, and guards who stand between him and the completion of his objectives.

There are a few new things this time around. Sam's upgraded arsenal now has a modular weapon system based on specs currently in development by the U.S. military. This quickly adds shotgun, sniper, and mini-launcher functionality to the standard assault rifle. You'll need it. Enemies have gotten smarter, using flares to illuminate dark areas and employing team tactics in combat,

flanking, and advancing undercover.

Splinter Cell has jumped on the *Havok* physics bandwagon, replete with wonderful, limb-flopping rag-doll action and all. Improved particle and lighting effects are on display, showing off smoke so thick it'll threaten to set off the fire detector in your living room, and eerily realistic water effects with textures that change appearance from different angles.

Rounding out the new stuff is a multiplayer mode, where two Shadownet ops work cooperatively. These Sam Fisher look-alikes sport a full playbook of superspy moves, sharing camera views and helping each other get around with boosts, rope climbing, and even a *Mission Impossible*-style dangling computer hack. Get ready to get your spy groove on again when *Chaos Theory* infiltrates stores just in time for the holidays.

—AF

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Not unlike a drunken, middle-aged swinger, the normally conventional Hewlett-Packard has shed its inhibitions to create a hulking game machine. And as you would expect from a drunken, middle-aged swinger, the Compaq X is loud, kind of ugly, and thanks to performance enhancing high-end components, ready to go all night long.

The Compaq X is a PC with all the trimmings. HP started with a brushed metal CoolerMaster case with a curved front and a little protrusion, behind which two LEDs cast a nefarious red glow. Then it added an MSI K8N Neo2 motherboard, two sticks of Samsung 512MB DDR PC3200 RAM, a pair of 74GB 10,000-rpm Raptors in RAID 0 configuration, and more lights. HP cooled this hulk with a CoolerMaster fan with a beautifully designed cowl that dissipates the CPU's hot and heavy antics through the back of the case. Finally, it added a pinch of Extreme goodness, the Pentium 4 EE 3.4-GHz CPU, a 256MB DDR Nvidia GeForce FX 6800 Ultra, and an Audigy 2 ZS, which supplants the mobo's built-in sound chip.

There you have it: a jargon filled paragraph about a machine that will set you back more than four grand after factoring in a monitor, speakers, mouse cozy, and beer helmet. But how well does this thing run?

We started our testing with 3DMark 2003. The Compaq X hit an unfrequented 12,109, which is a new *SURGE* record. This is in large part due to the supercharged GPU, the new PCI Express technology, and fast memory. Then we loaded up the graphics-guzzling *Doom 3*. The result? Stunning visuals with no lag or jaggies. Verily, Fire Imps, and

Pinkies have never looked so real or been rendered so smoothly as on this beast. In fact, it seems as if the folks at HP designed the X around *Doom 3*'s hardware requirements sheet and upped everything to 11.

There are a few negatives. This thing is loud. Turning it off in a room crowded with PCs lowered the ambient decibel level immediately. A little padding on the sides of the case would shut the fan up because the metal literally vibrates.

The little door on top of the PC looks big enough to hide a Nintendo 64 cartridge, so you pop it open expecting big things. Behind this door? Just two USB ports and a FireWire port. This configuration makes no sense considering all the open real estate on the front of the chassis, which is the natural, hassle-free location for a headphone jack or USB port to connect a joystick. Finally, the Compaq keyboard, which seems to be designed for less rigorous use, has a Sleep button right above the Escape key, leading to inadvertent game breaks with the slip of a finger.

Placed against the high-end boutique gaming PCs, the X has every component you could wish for, but it lacks the style of an Alienware or Voodoo. Will this play every game under the sun? Yes. Is it loud and brash? Yes. Is it a kick-ass gaming tower? Oh yeah. ☺

PROS

Speed, speed, speed
Incredible CPU/AGP combo

CONS

Loud
Poor USB port placement



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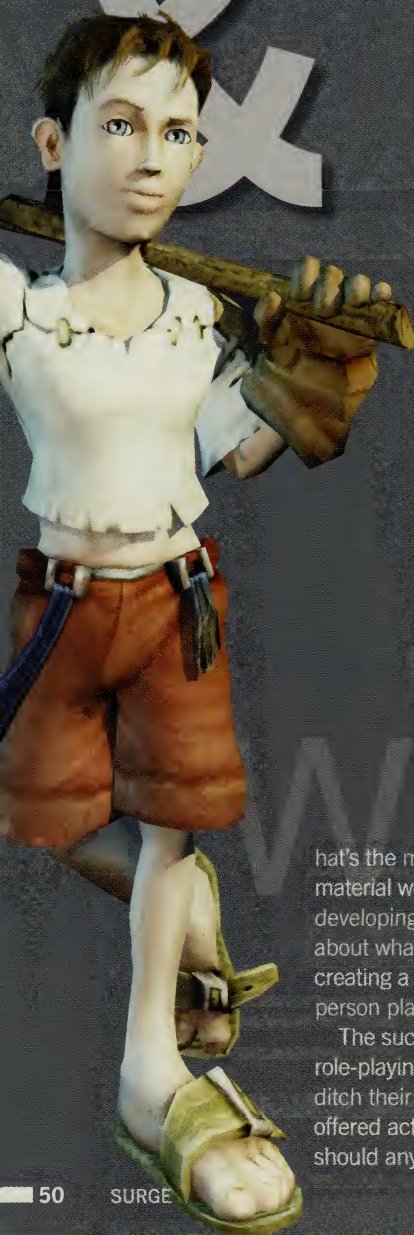
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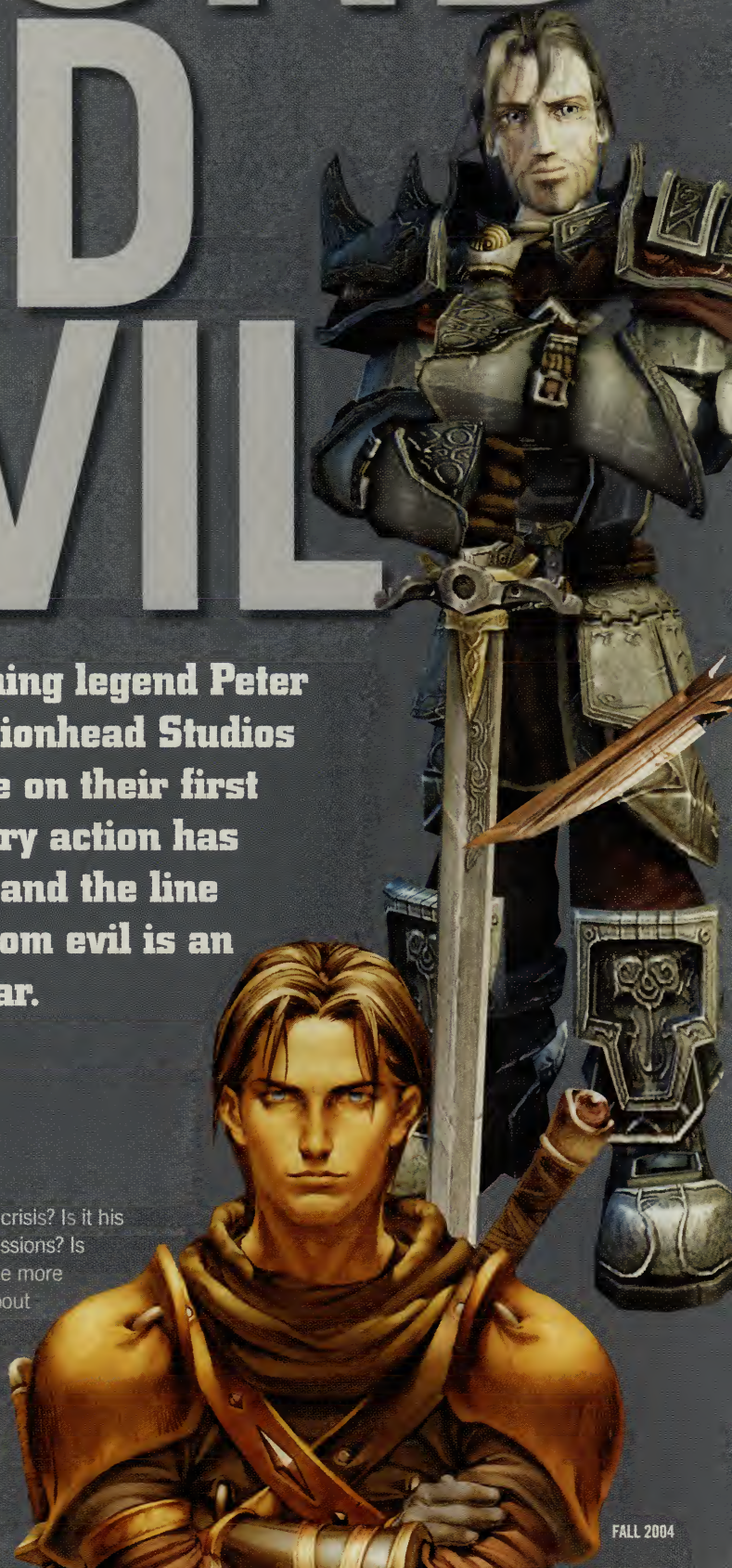
BEYOND GOOD & EVIL



With *Fable*, gaming legend Peter Molyneux and Lionhead Studios ambitiously take on their first RPG, where every action has a consequence, and the line dividing good from evil is an incoherent smear.

What's the measure of a man during a time of crisis? Is it his material wealth and how he wields his possessions? Is developing a character in a role-playing game more about what you have to fight with or more about creating a unique individual that reflects the person playing?

The success of *Diablo* taught many role-playing gamers they could safely ditch their nagging conscience because it offered action without consequence: Why should anyone feel guilty the morning after







Fable takes place in the world of Albion, which features diverse locales such as bustling towns, treacherous caverns, lush forests, and creepy swamps.

a rampage of nocturnal bloodletting? For all its hack n' slash glory, *Diablo* didn't go out of its way to give players a customizable role. A lot gets lost when every player enters the game world as the same readymade character and a rare magical weapon or fanciful armor constitutes the sum of your unique experience.

To Peter Molyneux, founder/director of Lionhead Studios and 20-year game-design veteran, the antidote to all that regulated gameplay is a matter of choice. In life, choices have ramifications. They define the person. In videogames, they lay the foundation for a good tale.

Molyneux and his creative cohorts have already stretched the simulation genre in games, including *Populous*, *Dungeon Keeper*, and *Black and White*—often with dementedly good humor. Now, they're turning their attention to the RPG. The result is *Fable*, an Xbox exclusive, which portends to stretch what we expect from a sword and sorcery RPG.

The premise is simple enough: Raised by a guild, you are a 12-year-old boy who sets off on the road to adventure and destiny. Faced early on with a stunning number of opportunities for mischievous pranks or noble good deeds, your life will unfold in front of you as the physical challenges become more rigorous and the moral choices more daunting. You enter the scene as a young lad and exit as a loved or despised old adventurer.

Fable's ability to adapt itself to individual players is what makes it an ambitious project. The game's first demonstrations, under the working title of *Project Ego*, displayed impressive graphics, compared to Xbox games then in release. Today, *Fable* has lost some of that visual edge. Still good-looking, its longevity will likely depend all the more on how unique an experience each player has.

Intrigued with the possibilities underlying a role-playing game that seriously pumps up the effects of player choices on player characters, *SURGE* sat down with Molyneux to discuss what he labels his "ridiculously ambitious" game.

The Choice Is Yours

Fable is Lionhead and Molyneux's first role-playing game. In light of the many challenges the genre

(continued on page 61)





**The secrets of the past have been forgotten,
but the Saga of Ryzom has just begun.**

For many centuries I have voyaged through the quiescent corridors of Ryzom. I bore witness to the Green Rising of Atys, and the birth of Hominkind. I witnessed their striving for survival in a merciless world of killing plants and swarming beasts. Worse, entrenched in their brutish ignorance they gave themselves to bloodshed in their vying for power with their own kin. Thus weakened by interracial warfare and bound to their territories in their self-imposed segregation, they fell victim to the terrible swarming of the Kitin...

Elias Tryton, Year 2525





The Saga of Ryzom is a multi-genre massively multiplayer online PC game launching this September.

Three generations ago, your civilization perished in the Great Swarming, when hordes of Kitin swept from the Prime Roots and wrought war and genocide. Now it is time to *reclaim your heritage*. Join forces with thousands of others, master the arts of sorcery, war, and tradecraft, and re-forge the destiny of your people.

The Saga of Ryzom will be played out over a period of eight years, during which players will be able to explore and adventure with thousands of others, in order to reveal the hidden mysteries not only of the world of Atys, but of the entire Ryzom universe.



Three generations have since passed for healing wounds and rebuilding lives, for introspection and rekindling the spirit of homankind. The time has now come for the wise and the brave to take up the reins of ambition, to blaze the trail to a new order, to span the rifts between continents and forge the destinies of their civilizations.

Elias Tryton, Year 2525



A Story Line That Matters

Ryzom boasts a wholly original universe fusing science fiction and fantasy where players shape the story and each server charts its own course.

A Lush, Living Ecosystem

The world of Aty's is alive, with a rich and diverse ecology where flora and fauna dynamically interact with each other and the ever-changing environment. Nothing is static in Ryzom.

Flexible Skill-Based Advancement

Develop your character through a skill-based system that grows in detail as you gain experience. Ryzom offers five huge skill trees with thousands of possible choices.

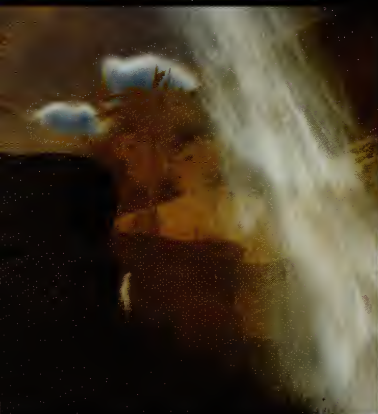
Rich Item Creation/Enchantment

Hunt and forage for scarce natural resources to craft complex items from the bottom up, then add enchantments to your equipment to make it vastly more powerful.



This is my one hope, for in unity will we best be armed to repel the tide of advancing evil. Certainly, I already hear the ominous rumblings of the Enemy that, alas, shall one day rock the very bowels of the green planet. But I have faith yet in this, the New Beginning of Mankind...

Elias Tryton, Year 2525





Massive Territorial Invasions

Ryzom's RAID Engine delivers excitement on a large scale. Monsters will assault key outposts, dynamically invade territories, and devastate entire regions if left unchecked.

Epic Battles with Hordes of Monsters

Fight hundreds of creatures at once in pitched battles! Ryzom offers groundbreaking mass combat mechanics that allow combat on a scale never before seen in MMORPGs.

Customized Skills and Special Attacks

Ryzom's unique Modular Action System lets you create your own custom actions. From a core set of building blocks, make as many spells and special attacks as your imagination will allow.

Guilds and Factions

Meet new friends and form your own Guild to compete against other players (PvP) or build strong alliances to face common enemies in mass combat.





"It looks great, sounds compelling, and, perhaps more importantly, feels different from the raft of fantasy MMOs threatening to gut the market"



"Ryzom could be the answer to your multiplayer prayers..."

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"Ryzom could be the prescription against staid and tired MMORPGs"

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Join the Saga, reveal the history, and become the future.

NEVRAX

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(continued from page 52)

presents for developers, most of their thought went into the concept of controlling a life, presenting players with the process of making choices, and adapting the character to the results of those choices in an easily understandable fashion.

"If I was someone who had never played an RPG, I'd be disappointed if I couldn't control the intimate, personal destiny of the character," Molyneux says. "That's why we had to start the player off as a 12-year-old kid, an unspoiled canvas."

That approach poses challenge after challenge, because all of those choices have to work together harmoniously.

"First you have to balance out the rewards for doing good or doing evil. For every good deed, there has to be an evil alternative, without the game encouraging the player in either direction. It is really tough," Molyneux admits.

Regardless of the difficulties of the approach, it

is obvious that Molyneux is completely fascinated with the choices players get to make in his game. He cannot resist slipping into a philosophical role, posing questions of character taken directly from *Fable*.

"If you came across a bully applying a severe beating to another child, would you help the victim, walk away, or help the bully?" Molyneux asks. "And if you did attack the bully in defense of the other child, what happens to you if you pummel the bully for too long?"

As he guides the main character from encounters with one nonplayer character (NPC) after another, Molyneux excitedly presents the courses of action available: Will you accept the coin from the philandering merchant to watch his wares while he slinks away for an afternoon quickie, decline the merchant's offer on principle, rat on him to his wife, or keep the coin *and* rat on him for good measure?

Molyneux doesn't so much ask these questions of





“I WAS SURPRISED TO DISCOVER HERE, IN THE UNITED STATES, THAT MOST PEOPLE APPROACH THE GAME WITH THE INTENTION OF BEING GOOD. THEY OFTEN CHANGE THEIR WAYS LATER, BUT AMERICANS DON’T APPROACH THE GAME LIKE MANY EUROPEANS, WHO ARE MUCH MORE LIKELY TO GO IN WITH THE INTENTION OF EMBRACING DARKER CHOICES.”

—PETER MOLYNEUX



So you want to be a good guy? You'll spend your time protecting civilians from bandits, running errands for town folk, and consulting the forces of benevolence at the Chapel of Light. Chances are you'll look like one of these heros.





BEING PETER MOLYNEUX

If there is a common thread linking Molyneux's games, it is his new and different approach to looking at society. *Fable* is his way of approaching the human experience through the prism of an RPG, just as *Black and White* was an approach through real-time strategy conventions. Given the excitement he gets from observing the critical decisions individuals make while playing *Fable*, perhaps leasing new office space and hanging a psychologist's shingle would better suit his social science predilections. Don't bet on it.

How does one of the deans of game development get his kicks after 20 years? A lot has changed since Molyneux started off as a programmer, from his early glories at Bullfrog Studios through the launching of Lionhead. Few creative professionals in the industry have had as storied a career as Molyneux and his cohorts, Sid Meier (*Civilization*, *Pirates!*, *Alpha Centauri*) and Warren Spector (*Wing Commander*, *System Shock*, *Deus Ex*).

"I get credit for far more than I do," Molyneux says.

Yet the man has done a lot, seen tremendous change within the game industry, and prospered despite those changes.

"There has been a silent revolution in game development that has mostly gone unnoticed," he says. "Gone are the days during the early 1990s [when] the ethos was creating games that challenged [players], when you would talk to colleagues in a pub and it was all about creating a level that no one else can conquer. Now it's all about, 'How do I get a player through the entire game?'"

He says developers and publishers no longer concentrate on gameplay dynamics as they once did. Now, creative discussions revolve around entertainment value, holding the players' attention and keeping them happy.

"When I started making games, if players got themselves into a bad spot, they just restarted. Restarting was all a part of the game. Now, every restart is a chance you'll lose the player, an opportunity for them to put down the game for good. There is so much more you have to consider now, and all of that changes how you approach making a game," he cautions.

Another of those fundamental changes is the business necessity of making sequels. There is a bias within the games community that producing sequels is a lesser accomplishment, but Molyneux disagrees. Pouring passion and energy into a new concept is easy. Sequels are tougher to him because they must be approached with as much ingenuity and passion as the original, and that's a difficult challenge for any team.

Keeping up with the ongoing technological transformation of games has meant that Molyneux's professional role has had to evolve to keep pace with the scale, complexity, and expectations laid on developers today.

"I had to give up programming. Had to do it. Giving up programming is my biggest sorrow," Molyneux laments. "Despite that, I still have the greatest job in the world. I get to dream dreams and see them realized. I get to inspire people."

If darker blood runs through your veins, your time in Albion can be spent creating misfortune for all the Ned Flanders in the land. You'll probably end up looking like one of these badasses.

character as he does dangle them in front of people as if they were rare treats. For him, the answer *is* a rare treat. In focus testing in the U.S. and Europe, the responses he got weren't what he was expecting.

"I was surprised to discover here, in the United States, that most people approach the game with the intention of being good," he says. "They often change their ways later, but Americans don't approach the game like many Europeans, who are much more likely to go in with the intention of embracing darker choices."

Those player choices are critically important. Each decision made goes into an expansive database that determines what kinds of encounters the player will face in the next village and how the character appears as he grows and ages. Fine-tuning that database has caused the thousands of bugs the development team has rigorously spent squashing throughout the spring and summer.

The Lionhead Pride

A year ago, Lionhead employed 125 people. Today, more than 250 people work at the studio. Within that number are 20 to 30 vets who have worked with Molyneux on every game since 1989's *Populous*. This talent core leads the many project teams. In addition to *Fable*, Lionhead is completing *B.C.*, *Black and White 2*, *The Movies*, and *Unity*.

Molyneux puts a special emphasis on the word "completion." He's astonished that so many of the programmers and designers Lionhead has hired in recent years have never actually completed a game.

"Our core people have been with us for over 10 years, and they provide us with amazing stability and trust," he says. "When you get to the end of a project, it's just hell. The strain on relationships is so hard when everyone is working so intensely for 18 months straight. As we get to the end, there's so many times I must turn to people and ask them to work weekends so we can finish the games. The pressure is incredible."

To ease that pressure, Molyneux is a big proponent of development teams acting as satellite communities within Lionhead, rather than promoting the studio as a monolithic enterprise. Team members are not assigned to a project based on their skills. Rather, they're encouraged to gravitate toward game concepts that they are drawn to creatively.

"When you lump people together into a creative team based on skills alone, you risk losing them," Molyneux advises. "You want people to care about what they are doing. A smaller culture, focused into





If you're evil enough, your character may grow horns and your eyes may start to glow. Needless to say, finding a nice wife will be much harder.

satellite teams, helps everyone keep their passion for their projects."

The *Fable* team, is finally in the home stretch. Was it hard to sustain the passion for *Fable*? All Molyneux admits is that there are times during the creation of each title when he'll gather everyone together to remind them of the potential of the game they are working on to inspire them. His voice exhibits equal parts satisfaction, relief, and passion as he demos *Fable* and proudly shares that the game is nearly finished with only minor balancing remaining.

The Devil Is in the Details

Navigating between different villages and towns in *Fable*, it's evident that your reputation precedes you. From stark terror and violent assaults to chummy invitations to share an ale or a roll in the hay, the depth and variety of character reactions to the approaching player are on a scale comparable to *Planescape Torment*. In *Planescape*, these encounters were scripted. Not so in *Fable*; the player reaps the rewards (or retribution) of his advance notoriety.

Rather than accessorize your character's look at the local merchant or armory, as in most RPGs, your appearance in the game slowly evolves based on how you resolve each conflict or encounter. The accumulated effect on your character can be breathtaking.

"It's a result of allowing you to pick your look based upon what you do in the game," Molyneux explains. "Some people really look like Gandolf; others look like something out of *The Dark Crystal*."

As Molyneux demonstrates, strutting into a town sporting bright red flesh and prominent horns most often prompts the local folk to run in the opposite direction. Don't expect to find the obligatory, oblivious NPCs in *Fable*. Using a cheat, Molyneux spawns a completely virtuous version of the character, naked down to his knickers. Strutting through town in this fashion, the lad is confronted with open derision and, upon entering a schoolhouse, abundant laughter and finger-pointing from the children. Arrest by the local authorities soon follows. Molyneux next spawns himself a bold hero, who is soon followed by adoring townsfolk. Chat up a tradesman's daughter and the hero will likely end up with a date for the night.

Between red, demonic flesh and well-tanned, heroic skin tone are a variety of shades, from gothic pale to magically infused luminescence. The same level of variety extends to the types of communities players encounter along their journey. The traits favored in a bandit camp or dark community will be much different than the run-of-the-mill village.

To keep the emphasis squarely on making choices, Molyneux explains the team's intention of making the combat system both elegant and uncomplicated.



Initiating attacks is as simple as pressing one button. There are no restrictions on mixing melee and magic casting. Nor are there rules preventing the simultaneous casting of as many spells as the character can handle.

"We wanted the combat to be fun, a way for you to show off all of the naughty or powerful attacks you have learned along the way," Molyneux says. "But *Fable* is not an RPG where you relentlessly combat-level to advance."

The devil definitely is in the details, not the combat. Every outcome from each encounter opens new player opportunities, many of them noncombat in nature. The right kind of reputation can lead to home ownership, shop ownership, or even matrimony. Molyneux says *Fable* will possess a strong trade economy that can seriously affect the prosperity of communities. The economy will be disrupted by attack or supported if players decide to become merchants.

As in real life, whatever choices you make, your character in *Fable* will inevitably perish. However, the amount of time it takes to reach that end is as open as the choices you make along the way.

"How fast the game ends is completely up to the player," Molyneux says. "I've seen people finish the first level in as little as 26 minutes, but it could take weeks if you looked into every opportunity."

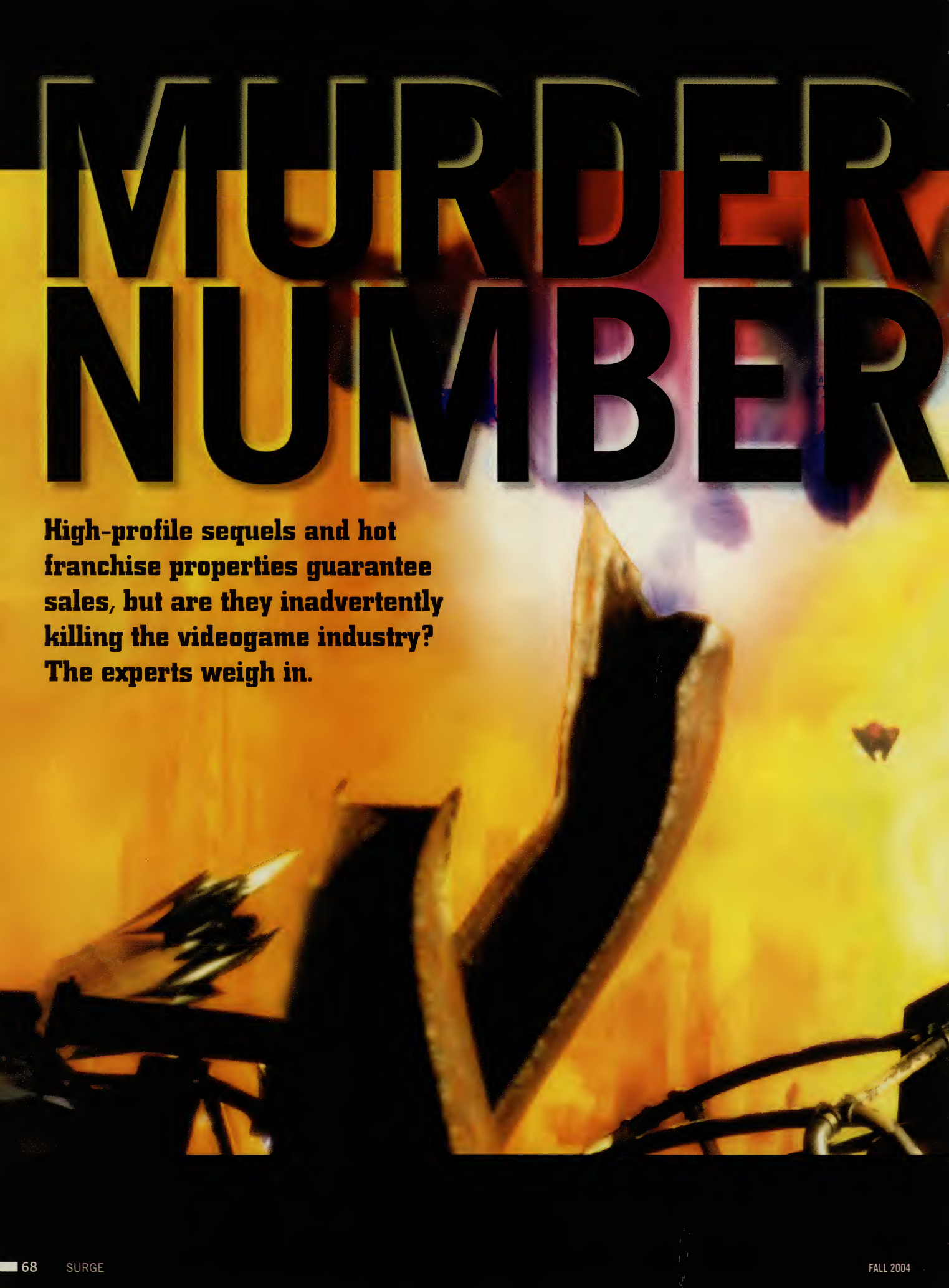
When the debugged version of *Fable* finally hits retail shelves this fall, players may learn that they face negative consequences even at times when they acted with the best intentions. Says Molyneux, "I love understanding the idea that what starts out as a good deed ends up as a bad deed." ☞



Whichever path you take, *Fable* will offer endless hours of gameplay.



MURDER NUMBER



High-profile sequels and hot franchise properties guarantee sales, but are they inadvertently killing the videogame industry? The experts weigh in.

BY
S

Take a close look at last year's top 20 best-selling titles, and you'll notice an unsettling detail: the fact that *True Crime: Streets of L.A.* actually made the list. More conspicuously, no fewer than 19 of the items showcased on the chart are either sequels or spin-offs of existing film, television, or videogame franchises. While this serves as a positive sign for those smitten with category leaders like *Madden* and *Final Fantasy*, we can't help but wonder what the trend's lasting effect on interactive entertainment will be. And, as industry insiders themselves admit, no one can guarantee the results will prove entirely positive.

"As consumers continue to broaden and become more



Rainbow Six 3



Doom 3

Halo 2

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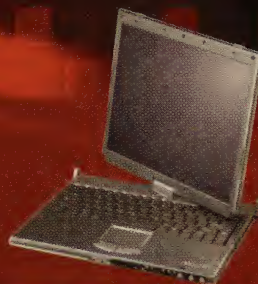
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mass market, gaming as a whole has become awash in sequels and licenses," says Midway CEO David Zucker. Though the prolific publisher is responsible for several of 2004's most original titles, including *Psi-Ops: The Mindgate Conspiracy* and *The Suffering*, its troubled leader confesses such ventures were, in actuality, flukes. "As the cost of making games has grown, and the odds of sales success with original intellectual property have become worse, the business has moved into a self-reinforcing downward cycle."

"WE NEED A NEW BUSINESS MODEL. WHAT WE LACK, AS MUCH AS ANYTHING, IS AN ALTERNATE FORM OF DISTRIBUTION, AN INDIE SCENE."
—WARREN SPECTOR

Then there are magazines, like the one you're holding, which Zucker says aren't entirely free of blame when it comes to the way the situation has evolved. "Publishers are less willing to take risks on original projects because of the daunting economics, and the press is less willing to stick their neck out on early coverage of new, unproven games. Have a peek at the majority of major hobbyist publications' covers over the last year—they're almost entirely devoted to [the most prominent brands]."

Determining why both the market and media outlets that cover it have shifted toward such a strategy isn't difficult. Recent findings from The NPD Group, a market research firm, found that an incredible 42 percent of all amusement software

produced is built around licenses, and another 25 percent is built on franchise content. Since 2001, when current next-generation consoles debuted, the two categories have accounted for a mind-boggling 80 percent of total videogame sales.

Certain irrefutable truths emerge from the research; first and foremost, audiences actually prefer familiar faces to meeting new ones. Think back on the numerous critical smashes—*Divine Divinity*, *Ico*, *Ikaruga*, and so forth—that never enjoyed proportionate commercial success. Better yet, picture last holiday season's blockbuster action-adventure *Prince of Persia*, whose aggregate review rating is a staggering 93 percent, according to GameRankings.com. As of January 2004, the product had sold only 330,000 units on PlayStation 2. Sales for *Dragon Ball Z: Budokai II* sat at 720,000 when measured over a comparable time frame, more than double that of its storied competitor. The reason for the upset: branding. A healthy buzz and robust advertising couldn't compete with the name recognition that comes with a product whose presence stretches across collectible cards, lunch boxes, and cable network programming.

Observers need look no further than the avalanche of similarly minded games shipping in the near future to spot the principle in motion. Scan the multitude of upcoming titles due this fall and see if you don't experience a little déjà vu: *Halo 2*, *The Matrix Online*, *Gran Turismo 4*, *Metal Gear Solid 3*, *Neo Contra*, *Resident Evil 4*. Today's most anticipated offerings merely expand upon previous chart-topping properties. With even hoary old headliners making cameos (e.g., *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*, *The Bard's Tale*, *Sid Meier's Pirates!*), it's a sure sign that originality's playing second fiddle to profit margins for the moment.

Two POVs

Fanboys shouldn't get their He-Man Underoos in a bunch just yet. David Cole, president of DFC

Midway stuck its neck out in 2004 with several new game titles, like *The Suffering*, *Psi-Ops*, and *NBA Ballers*, all of which gained the admiration of gamers and critics.



REPEAT OFFENDERS

Five stupefyingly heinous sequels and the series that spawned them.

Despite what you've heard, trading lasting fame for instant shame is difficult for favored franchises. But as history shows, we've seen countless instances where popular brands poop out new installments that even desperate dorks wouldn't touch. Witness a few of the more spectacular disappointments that have indelibly scarred the wired world's collective consciousness:

The 11th Hour

From: Virgin Interactive
For: 3DO, Macintosh, PC
Release Date: 1995

Supernatural thriller *The 7th Guest*, once a standard-bearer for CD-ROM technology, set benchmarks for interactive entertainment. This successor, a morass of grainy video clips and B-movie acting, proved equally groundbreaking by sinking to new lows. So awful, production resulted in developer Trilobyte's dissolution. We still haven't forgiven the bastards.

Phantasmagoria: A Puzzle of Flesh

From: Sierra On-Line
For: PC
Release Date: 1996

A successful horror adventure franchise bequeaths an insultingly inane followup. As creepy as a convicted molester, the tale chronicles troubled technical writer Curtis Craig's exploits. Between the seamy outing's grisly murders, bizarre homoerotic subtexts, uncomfortable sexual situations, and terrifying voice-overs, the name says it all—playing this puppy's like self-mutilation.

Turok: Evolution

From: Acclaim
For: GC, PS2, Xbox
Release Date: 2002

Peep the premise: American Indian champion Tal'Set confronts a racist cyborg cavalry captain in a parallel primordial universe. If you think the concept sounds staler than stegosaurus dung, consider that the first-person action doesn't fare much better. The only shocker: It took Acclaim this long to lose the license.

Might and Magic IX

From: 3DO
For: PC
Release Date: 2002

3DO did many things well as a company. Unfortunately, making videogames wasn't one of them. Jon Van Caneghem started this award-winning franchise from his apartment. By the time the title hit its ninth and most frivolous incarnation, were the rights not already sold, he'd have been living in the poorhouse.

Lara Croft: Tomb Raider—The Angel of Darkness

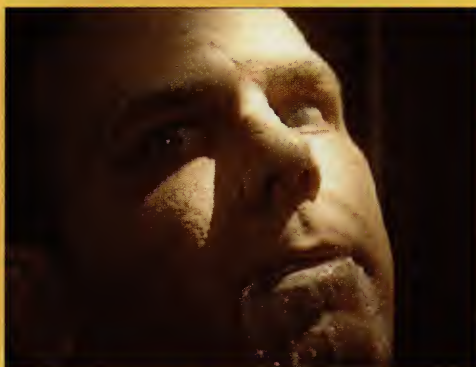
From: Eidos
For: PC, PS2
Release Date: 2003

Listen closely. That wheezing sound you hear? Amazingly, it's not the buxom heroine struggling with an ever-expanding cup size, but an aging concept coughing up its dying breath in one of the biggest bombs in recent memory. After shipping it, Eidos couldn't show creator Core Design the door fast enough.



The 11th Hour.

"Don't make fun of my acid-washed jeans or I kill you 'till you die from it. Then I kill you some more. Then I throw you, like, over there."



Phantasmagoria: A Puzzle of Flesh

It's a good thing there haven't been any movies with bodyless androids drooling milk. Oh, wait.



Turok: Evolution

You know if *Maxim* gives a game 5 out of 5, you're in trouble.



Might and Magic IX

This game was so boring that even the NPCs fell asleep.



Lara Croft: Tomb Raider—The Angel of Darkness

Straight off the DDR2 tour.

Intelligence, a research and consulting firm that tracks emerging entertainment venues, says the series of sequels isn't necessarily a bad thing for the industry. "If consumers truly want sequels and games licensed from other media, they're getting what they desire." By the same token, he says, "if a substantial group of people are looking for something original, and major publishers aren't providing it, it creates opportunities for startup developers that couldn't otherwise compete in the market."

The suggestion makes sense in theory, but according to acclaimed designer Warren Spector, it doesn't translate into reality. "It's clear to me that the current commercial climate works against 'small' guys in every way you could imagine," he says. "We need a new business model. What we lack, as much as anything, is an alternate form of distribution, an indie scene." Known as the brains behind the *Deus Ex* series, Spector laments that among developers, "the amount of complaining and gnashing of teeth at the current emphasis on sequels is amazing."

Regardless, Spector himself doesn't mind contributing to said endeavors and claims that effort invested into titles like *Thief: Deadly Shadows* can be rewarding in its own right. "I've never understood the idea that sequels don't require as much creativity as ground-up originals," he asserts. "In fact, I've always believed you could be as creative making a sequel as you can when [you're] creating something wholly new. You can tell a novel story, try some fresh gameplay ideas, and find unexpected ways to capture the essence of a thing without repeating what you've done before. The challenges of giving players what they

love about earlier games in a series without rehashing them can be as interesting as starting from scratch. The problem isn't with sequels per se, but with the way in which a lot of people approach them."

Other respected industry players, such as Naughty Dog design director Evan Wells, share the same beliefs. "Working on a sequel shouldn't limit one's creativity," he says. "If you approach the project from the standpoint of expanding the franchise and exploring new territory, there's plenty of room for personal expression." Wells, a key contributor to top titles like *Toe Jam & Earl 2* and *Jak 3*, cites a number of practical reasons to justify the push to revisit formerly retired realms. "So much work goes into developing a game these days that most developers welcome the opportunity to leverage the blood, sweat, and tears that went into the original outing's creation. A team of any size benefits from the ability to reuse technology and art assets."

Does the end user profit from these practices? A glance at IGN.com's Top 100 Games of All Time insinuates the answer is, ironically, a big affirmative. Roughly half the items showcased in the feature qualify as retreads by any reasonable standard. Among the many sequels listed: *Wing Commander II*, *Super Mario 64*, *The Legend of Zelda: The Ocarina of Time*, *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater II*, and *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*. Still not convinced? Try to name the most influential game of the new millennium. Award yourself bonus points if you answered *Grand Theft Auto III*.

Arguments aside, those who feel developers should shun known commodities are in luck: amidst all the repetition lies a ray of hope in Microsoft's XNA platform. A suite of tools that shares technology solutions across PC, Xbox, and Windows Mobile platforms, XNA is designed to ensure developers focus on content, not conversion issues. Time saved porting incompatible code equals diminished expenditures and lesser budgetary constraints, which purportedly provides the wiggle room necessary for smaller software houses to coexist peacefully with publishing giants.

Says Scott Henson, XNA platform director for Microsoft, "XNA doesn't discriminate between original titles or sequels; it fuels innovation in all areas. Think of it this way: There's a badass Ferrari engine—the hardware—which is only getting more powerful and complex. XNA is like the key to the car. It shifts game developers into high gear." The benefits to the videogame business, he claims, will be immediate and applicable across the board.

The future isn't as bleak as skeptics suggest. As Midway's Zucker puts it, "There will always be a place in the market for new, original content. Our industry is perpetually driven forward by innovative gameplay and ideas, and I don't see this changing anytime soon." ☺

Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas is the follow-up to two of the most popular and influential games of the decade.



UNSUNG HEROES

The games we love to miss

Raising the bar is a challenge for software designers, and not just because most haven't exercised in decades. In a business climate critical of innovation, it's rare for a title to push boundaries, let alone promote play mechanics that could potentially define entire genres. Nevertheless, we feel that these neglected favorites did enough to justify a sequel in our eyes.

Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem

From: Nintendo

For: GameCube

Silicon Knight's critically acclaimed psychological thriller-meets-*Indiana Jones* adventure didn't break sales records, but we look back fondly on this epic story, which spanned 20 centuries of struggle between good and evil. The gameplay and creepy sanity meter were both perfectly executed, and the production quality was the best we've seen on the GameCube to date (yes, we're including Mario, Link, and Samus in this equation).

Bionic Commando

From: Capcom

For: NES

As one of the first titles to reward stealth or include a grappling hook, *Bionic Commando* has already left its genealogical imprint on successful games as varied as *Super Metroid* and *Splinter Cell*, but its storied lineage has never been rewarded with a true console sequel. It's time Capcom resurrected this great character (who could totally kick Viewtiful Joe's ass) and gave him his due.

BioForge

From: Origin

For: PC

Origin Systems' *BioForge* was a science-fiction version of *Frankenstein* told from the monster's perspective. You were the anonymous subject of a devious scientist attempting to build the ultimate killing machine. You had to find answers and enact sweet, bloody revenge (your very first task in the game involved beating a guy to death with his own severed arm). The game combined a complicated hand-to-hand fighting system with complex puzzle solving, and the story managed to transcend the "who am I?" amnesia clichés to actually deliver suspense and black comedy at the same time. Origin had an expanded version of the game planned, but scrapped it due to poor sales.

The Oregon Trail

From: MECC

For: PC, Mac

Who doesn't look back fondly on setting out on your horse-drawn covered wagon for the West Coast, only to lose three family members and two oxen while fording the Columbia River, all during your keyboarding class in elementary school? Though it officially had a sequel in 1996, we're dreaming of a visionary remake that combines the spirit of HBO's *Deadwood* series with the open-ended emergent gameplay of *Grand Theft Auto*. Now that's the American dream done right.

The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay

From: Vivendi Universal

For: Xbox

Actor Vin Diesel is no Oscar winner. Rapper Xzibit would stab anyone who called him a thespian. Put the two together in a gorgeous sci-fi offering, and you've got the makings of an incredibly atmospheric romp. Participants explore a futuristic prison while snuffing guards, shanking inmates, and dancing around dropping the soap in the best-looking Xbox title to date.



Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem

You wish your hat was that cool.



Bionic Commando

Indoor parachuting was all the rage back then.



BioForge

On your list of things to do: Beat this guy to death.



The Oregon Trail

Who didn't love shootin' rabbits, deer, and buffalo for dinner?



The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay

For once, watching Vin Diesel didn't hurt so much.



Growing Pains

Games are getting sexy again. Does this signal maturity or an extended adolescence?

Every couple of years it happens. Fantasy games filled with bikini armor suddenly aren't mature enough, and the game industry collectively heaves a decidedly adult gasp. The last quarter of 2004 is filled with releases that trumpet sex over violence, watchdog groups be damned.

It's easy to look at *The Guy Game* or *Playboy: The Mansion* and draw quick, superficial concerns. Have publishers mistaken breasts for evolution? Is the medium hiding behind the M rating, refusing to grow up? Or does sex simply sell?

For years, XXX hentai games have enjoyed a significant presence in Japan, where the releases are tolerated by vendors and snapped up by fans. Very few have been legitimately released in the States, though import vendors and file-trading services are rife with the ultra-adult fare. That tiny segment of the market impacts American games no more than similarly styled anime affects Disney. With full-frontal nudity its one enduring taboo, North America simply isn't ready for tentacles.

So, is the spotlighted sextet of upcoming sexy games a collection of isolated decisions, rather than a harbinger of things to come? Doug Lowenstein, president of the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), the organization that often spearheads defense of interactive entertainment, is doubtful. "I think this is a niche market at best now, and it's far too soon to predict whether such games represent a trend," he says.

Schellely Olhava, an analyst for the technology trend-watching firm IDC, concurs. "Mature-themed games have gotten a lot of press of late, but I'm not even sure I'd call this a trend. It's just games," she says. "It's what the industry does." The mainstream press, incited by protective parents and outspoken conservatives, may not agree. That means gamers should prepare for a period of alarmism as juvenile as some of the content it decries.

"No doubt such content will be troublesome to certain people, and we respect that," Lowenstein says. "At the end of the day, we're talking about a limited number of games here. For example, in 2003, 84 percent of the games rated were either 'E' (for everyone) or 'T' (for teen)."

"There always is alarmism," laughs Olhava. "A few years ago, there was a game called *Panty Raid*. Who remembers that now?"

Objective analysis of this crop of releases suggests only one thing: Publishers are responding to the demands of a mid-20s demographic that remains

largely male. "It's constant in the industry," says Olhava. "Adults want more mature content, like with movies. The game industry has responded to that and put a good self-policing rating system in place." Films, however, have a broader demographic and critical base that demands adult content go beyond simple nudity. The game industry, meanwhile, is tenderly exploring its ability, in games like *The Sims*, to integrate sex and storytelling.

One notion suggested by the new adult lineup, full of surefire Wal-Mart pariahs, is that the industry as a whole may be moving beyond the point where such retailers are essential outlets for a successful game. According to Olhava, "Wal-Mart is incredibly important for selling in the game market, and they move a lot of software. Would lack of support there negatively impact a game? Possibly. But, if adults really want to play, they can go elsewhere to purchase."

The bottom line, according to both analysts, is always how the titles play. "It doesn't matter how titillating the content is if there's good-quality gameplay," explains Olhava. "If a game sucks, people aren't going to play it. *BMX XXX* got a lot of press, but didn't seem to be a great game, and it never sold."

That means the following six games have to stare down their own performance anxieties, without the group confidence of belonging to anything as dignified as a trend.





PLAYBOY: The Mansion

Publisher: Arush Entertainment

Developer: Cyberlore Studios

Platform: PC, PS2, Xbox

Where else to begin than with *The Master*? *Playboy* puts players in Hugh Hefner's slippers as he tries to transform a sketchy men's mag into a publishing empire. Set entirely in the mansion, the 12-mission Campaign mode tells the bunny's tale, as Hef throws ever-more fabulous parties to generate magazine content. From a glorified hovel populated by assistants and a few writers and photographers, the home transforms into the ultimate pad, from which Hugh (and you) hand-pick "talent" for each issue. Send minions out to write stories and conduct interviews, turn a wandering waitress into the Playmate of the Month, or just have a shag under the stairs with a future ex-wife. First-person photo shoots (and those "encounters") provide the titillation, but the game is surprisingly tame. At times, *The Mansion* feels more like the managerial portion of a sports game. Then again, while wandering Hef's home, most guys would be thinking about baseball.

Nudity? Yep

Innuendo Rating: Medium-high



SINGLES: Flirt Up Your Life

Publisher: Eidos

Developer: Rotobee

Platform: PC

The pitch for this Eidos release must have been something like "a *Sims* expansion with sex." Feel free to debate the merits of the idea, but *Singles* does indeed follow it to the messy end, though seemingly at the expense of realistic simulation. The game puts players in control of two roommates, the goal being to get them in bed together. To make the magic happen, each character has a limited palette of responses to stimuli such as romance, sensuality, fun, and friendship. Superficially, the game is heavily indebted to Maxis' classic, but it's got little of the depth. The process by which these perfect strangers end up having breakfast in bed is heavily scripted and reliant upon relationship logic that doesn't ring true. Faced with a looming weekend free of real flirtation, you'll be reminded, playing *Singles*, how much you'd rather have the real thing.

Nudity? Yep

Innuendo Rating: Medium-high



THE SIMS 2

Publisher: EA

Developer: Maxis

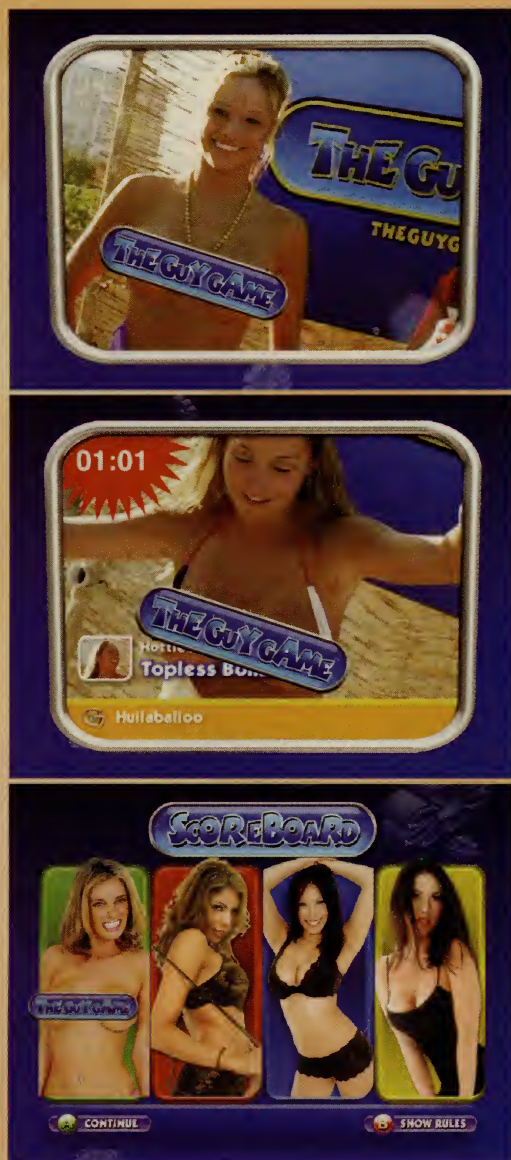
Platform: PC

The sequel to the title that broke every law of game sales promises to deliver the most realistic depiction of sex and relationships. Maxis has extended the generational reach of the game engine, so sims now mate, have children, and die, but not before passing along their characteristics in true genetic fashion. More advanced graphics provide good facial expressions and much more expressive body language. You'll see catfights and make-out sessions, but the spawning sims remain strictly PG. The facts of life are slightly less titillating than in your average 5th grade health class. Nevertheless, this may be the first truly mature game, since decisions made in the heat of passion could affect the way characters behave generations down the road. It's certainly not *Sims Gone Wild*, but for versatile, noticeably realistic character interaction, we're unlikely to see a more flexible title anytime soon.

Nudity? No

Innuendo Rating: Medium





THE GUY GAME

Publisher: Gathering

Developer: Top Heavy Studios

Platform: PS2, Xbox

Putting this quiz show on even the same level as *Leisure Suit Larry* is akin to comparing strip poker with that highbrow orgy scene in *Eyes Wide Shut*. *The Guy Game* is lowbrow all the way: answer a trivia question, see some breasts, drink. It's basically *You Don't Know Jack* with an emphasis on nudity, as players match wits with drunk girls captured on video during spring break. For every question put to players, a video clip plays of an inebriated, insecure lass trying to come up with the answer. If she fails, she flashes. Players get to see even more skin when they answer their questions correctly. Avatars (i.e., hot models) represent each player's score, adding or subtracting clothes. Get beyond the breasts and there's not much that's really adult—no sex, no relationships. In other words, it's the college man's perfect game.

Nudity? Duh

Innuendo Rating: Low



Q. What is the capital of Wisconsin?

- Y Milwaukee**
- X Sheboygan**
- B Madison**
- A Green Bay**

\$800
MATCH
\$754





LEISURE SUIT LARRY: Magna Cum Laude

Publisher: Vivendi Universal

Developer: High Voltage Software

Platform: PC, PS2, Xbox

In the glory days of Sierra adventure games, Leisure Suit Larry was the polyester-clad hero who had middle schoolers ready to swipe dad's cash and computer. The series always pushed a risqué, Benny Hill edge, and that quality carries over to the newest incarnation. This time, the lead is the original Larry's nephew, who is trying to score at college.

More than the rest of this adult pack, LSL has a great sense of humor. Larry, through the magic of mini-games, navigates the murky waters of sexually charged conversation. When talking to the ladies, players must guide a tiny swimming sperm through a minefield of obstacles. Make it through, and Larry's charm comes through. Hit a bomb, and the poor guy will get tongue tied, fart, or worse. Other mini-games replicate the classic *Tapper* arcade game, tried and true drinking contests, and wet T-shirt competitions. All that's missing is a fraternity rush sequence.

Nudity? Uh-uh

Innuendo Rating: Wicked high

RUMBLE ROSES

Publisher: Konami

Developer: Konami

Platform: PS2



Thanks to Tecmo, T&A is hardly a new addition to the fighting genre. Konami's upcoming grappler expands on memories of the Gorgeous Ladies of Wrestling by removing

most of their clothes and pushing the combatants into a mud bath. The gameplay seems fairly solid, with well-designed grappling and takedowns, but each girl's ultracheesecake intro amply proves that wrestling form and mechanics are only tiny line items. There's little to no chance of clothes being shed, but the game cranks the titillation factor when a shimmering layer of mud makes the ladies look like greasy nudes.

Are all those thigh-smasher headlocks really effective technique, or merely the best way to push young players into self-discovery? *Rumble Roses* will live or die on playable matches, but even if it's the best grappler ever, how many players will be rocking the controller in the dead of night, while the rest of the family is asleep?

We thought so.

Nudity? Nada

Innuendo Rating: High



GRIDIRON CLASSIC



Two heavyweight football simulations step onto the field, and only one goes home the victor. Will it be *Madden 2005* or *ESPN 2K5*?

With all the pretender football titles like *NFL Fever* and *Gameday* staying on the sidelines where they belong, the stakes between the esteemed *Madden* dynasty and the polished *ESPN* franchise have never been higher. *Madden* is ready to defend its Lombardi trophy, but with an amazing \$20 price tag, *ESPN* is looking to answer back with its own victory dance. So, which is it—*Madden* or *ESPN*? We break down the respective game plans to choose our winner.





FIRST QUARTER: PRESENTATION

Style goes a long way in today's visually driven world, and football games are no exception. When it comes to presentation, *ESPN* delivers the quality that its name implies. From its detailed in-game player profiles to the informative stat boxes lifted straight out of *Sunday Night Football*, the game bleeds the cutting-edge style of a professional sportscast. Delivered from perfect camera angles, the instant replays blend seamlessly into the play-calling screen if you opt to skip the full-screen replay. The player models are the best we've seen in any sports game to date. In fact, casual fans walking past the TV may be hard-pressed to tell the game apart from a real *ESPN* telecast.

At the end of each week, *2K5* treats you to an episode of *SportsCenter* where host Chris Berman recaps the games and, if you own an Xbox, even shows in-game highlights. This creates great immersion and keeps you up to date on which teams are shaping up to be contenders as you move through the season.

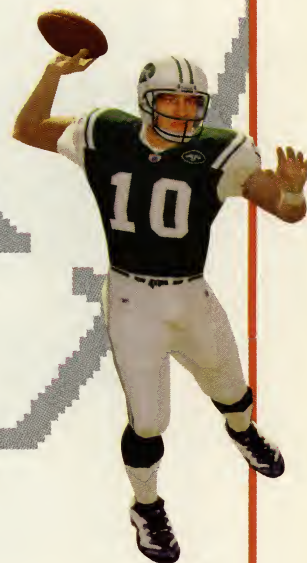
Noticeably absent in the *ESPN* package is the network's own play-by-play team of Joe Theisman, Paul McGuire, and Mike Patrick. Instead, the game sticks with the same schmucks they've had for the past few years. The commentators are so inane, you'd expect to find them covering NFL Europe or high school games on cable access. It's time to up the ante and make the commentary fall in line with the rest of the *ESPN* presentation.

Madden brings back the famed duo of Al Michaels and the fat man himself, but the commentary is almost exactly the same as the year before. Rarely did we hear either of the two say something we

hadn't already heard, which is rather disappointing.

Both the horrible camera angles and boring "dramatic" cut scenes introduced several years ago mar the replays, and in-game statistics are scarce for a football game of this magnitude. The stat boxes look much better than last year, and while the player models have much more detail and polish, *ESPN's* look more natural.

In response to *ESPN's SportsCenter* feature, EA has included EA Radio and newspapers to track league happenings. You can follow your team's weekly progress in local and national newspapers or by listening to Tony Bruno's radio show, which is filled with league news, player interviews, and fake listener commentary. Both are excellent ideas that fall flat because of uninspiring execution. The newspapers run the same type of stories nearly every week, and Tony Bruno's canned commentary was nearly unlistenable. EA Radio failed to address major events (like a team going undefeated for the first time since the 1972 Dolphins), and the boring interviews could put even the interviewee's mother to sleep. *Madden* has some work to do to reach the level of sophistication offered by *ESPN*.



First Quarter Recap: *ESPN* takes an early 14-3 lead.





SECOND QUARTER: ON THE FIELD

The stat call-outs, player profiles, and instant replays add atmosphere, but at the end of the day, the game is won or lost on the field. This year's *ESPN* control scheme is relatively unchanged from the year before; the playbooks are pulled directly from the NFL teams, and the robust audible system allows for different audible sets for each offensive formation. Most of the passing and running action is swift, and the player animations are far more diverse and realistic than *Madden*. Instead of incorporating only six or seven tackling animations, your runner will hit the turf differently nearly every time he's taken down, depending on his speed, body positioning, and the defender's angle of attack.

The computer AI in the game is highly realistic—running teams will pound your defense, and passing teams will stretch the field. If you play a team like the Colts, Peyton Manning will bark audibles before the snap and even shift to a hurry-up offense to keep you on your heels. The aspect we most appreciate about the *ESPN* gameplay is the overall realism;

games tend to stay close, and the scores don't always get out of hand. This creates more drama for big plays, like long touchdown passes and interceptions, and the outcome of the game tends to reflect real-life scenarios. If you throw four interceptions while your opponent never turns the ball over, your chances of pulling out a victory are relatively slim. At the end of a season, most of the player stats were on par with the real NFL counterpart, which is a testament to the realistic gameplay.

The big hang-up we have with *ESPN* is the fluidity of motion along the sidelines. During certain sequences, like swing passes to the halfback or out routes to receivers, the animations appear choppy and the players oftentimes run straight out of bounds. The quarterback never seems to throw the pass to the runner in route, so if he hasn't headed for a cup of Gatorade he has to stop and awkwardly gather the ball. These jerky moments compromise the realism and will turn off football fans who are used to the smooth motion of *Madden*.

EA, like Visual Concepts, left the core gameplay of its 2005 version intact. The biggest addition (one of few) is the right-analog-based hit stick, a hit-or-miss tool that can lead to fumbles if you land a shoulder or to touchdowns for the opposition if you miss your target. Minor updates to the playbook include receiver option routes, but the *Madden* faithful should be pleased that their favorite plays are back.





In previous editions of *Madden*, if your team jumped ahead by four or five touchdowns, the computer would inevitably mount an amazing rubber-band comeback. EA curbs that this year with stingier player-controlled defenses. The computer AI still gets even with uncanny big plays, albeit with less frequency.

Madden gives you more choices for presnap adjustments than some offensive coordinators give their quarterbacks in the NFL. This year, for certain game situations, you can create your own player packages, which are easily enacted by the push of a button. The audible system needs an update from the six-play set, but the new formation shifts should keep your opponents guessing. On the defensive side of the ball, the adjustments are amazingly intricate. In addition to shifting your defensive

line, linebacker, and secondary units, you can now alter individual player assignments, which helps you adjust your coverage or blitz scheme without changing your entire defense.

The player animations build on last year's improvements, but it still lags behind *ESPN*. Big hits look nastier than ever, but they occur rarely enough that it doesn't take away from the sim feeling. The game lacks dynamic pass coverage animations—another carryover from last year; cornerbacks make dramatic movements to tip balls away from receivers, so even if a player looks open, a lot of the time even the crappiest of cornerbacks will make an effective last-second attempt to knock the ball away. As much as this may irk the hard-core realists, the fluidity of motion and general feel to the running and passing game is second to none; the passing system is the best in the business, and defenses have toughened up to prevent a lot of big runs.

Second Quarter Recap: *Madden* cuts into the lead, but *ESPN* is ahead 21-17 going into halftime.





THIRD QUARTER: FRONT OFFICE

For millions of football fanatics, a football sim is all about the franchise mode, where you make the decisions that will make or break your team's chances of becoming a Super Bowl champ.

Visual Concepts has done a lot to freshen up *ESPN's* franchise mode, with weekly game plans, a newly configured contract system, and draft guru Mel Kiper providing insight on prospects building up at draft day.

During the season, you can set the weekly practice schedule to prep your team for the big game. Further, you can set the tone of your press conferences and team meetings to encourage or challenge your players. The decisions you make will determine the team focus and morale. The choices are bountiful, and you may need a full season to understand the nuances of the scheduling, but your plans can carry over week to week, so when you find a winning combination of film time, position drills, and conditioning, you can leave the schedule intact.

When you're trying to squeeze players under your salary cap, sometimes financial wizardry is in order. The new contract system lets you front-load, back-load, or balance out your payments to players, depending on what works best for your short- and long-term needs. The only problem we encountered with the new contract system was its inability to restructure contracts. If you renegotiate with a player under contract, you end up paying him the new contract, plus the remaining bonus from the previous contract, which places further strain on your salary cap. There is no way to shift some of the payment into the later years to clear cap space, so building your team becomes very difficult if you have a few star players making tons of money every year.

With the inclusion of Mel Kiper's commentary and his famed Big Board, Visual Concepts has given the draft a significant upgrade. The same can't be said for the computer's draft day decision making, which remains horribly flawed. In the two drafts we participated in, we saw an extraordinary run on three positions; we were the only team not to choose a halfback, tackle, or defensive end in the first round. This meant that teams weren't drafting to fill needs, which left a number of great players on the board, ripe for the picking in the later rounds.

Where *ESPN* falters, *Madden* shines. From monitoring player moods to setting the price of hot dogs in your stadium, *Madden* gives you control over nearly every facet of your

organization. The popular owner and minicamp modes return, and EA vamped up the preseason with position battles. In these, player performances will dictate who will win contested starting positions during your four preseason games. If your favorite player gets unseated from his starting position, but you start him anyway, you may have to deal with a disgruntled backup going to the press and creating controversy.

With the new player-mood feature, you can monitor team behavior, and you'll need it. A few bad seeds may end up affecting your overall team morale if you don't try to rectify the situation by giving them more playing time, trading them, or releasing them into free agency.

EA overhauled the *Madden* draft interface to improve the flow of useful information. During your pick, you'll have instant access to team and player stats to see how each candidate fits your depth chart. Instead of listing players simply by which round they are expected to go, this year the game indicates which players will most likely be selected with the top ten picks, which can save you valuable scouting points if you're not picking high in the draft. The sheer comprehensiveness of *Madden's* franchise mode continues to impress us.

SC DRAFT REVIEW

FERNANDO WALLACE
 POSITION: HALFBACK
 COLLEGE: TEXAS TECH

PICK	TEAM	NAME	POS	COLLEGE
9	CIN	Ellis Benson	T	Florida State
10	SF	Roland Washington	HB	Wake Forest
11	TEN	Fernando Wallace	HB	Texas Tech
12	STL	Lorenzo Zimmerman	T	Arizona

ESPN

E-MAIL

QUINCY CARTER
 17 QB

- View Depth Chart
- Position Battles**
- Player Stats
- View Rosters
- View Team Info

Cowboys
 From: Coach Dallas Coach
 Sent: Preseason, Week 1
 Subj: Battle

Message 2/4
 I've had it with the coverage of this thing by the media. I'm just going to let them battle it out for the starting job. Whichever player has the better preseason will win the job.

EA MADDEN 2005

Third Quarter Recap: *Madden* goes on a scoring run to jump ahead 34-24.





FOURTH QUARTER: INTANGIBLES

Each year, *Madden* and *ESPN* offer peripheral game enhancements to up the ante, and 2005 is no different. Leading off the intangibles is *ESPN*'s VIP system, the most intriguing peripheral development of the year. By tracking a player's gameplay habits—from his run/pass balance to his defensive adjustments—the VIP system allows you to download your friend's profile from a memory card or from the online lobby to practice against him in a simulation. This is an ingenious way to fan players' competitive flames, allowing increased familiarity with opponents before taking the field.



The popular Crib feature, which lets you use the points you earn to pimp out your pad, makes a comeback this year. The Crib now includes celebrity challenges, so you can take on hand-picked teams controlled by VIPs like Steve-O and Carmen Electra. The celebs talk smack and offer titillating commentary during the games.

Another great development in *ESPN* is the Stadium Music, which allows Xbox users to rip their favorite songs and implant them in game situations. Want Guns N' Roses' "Welcome to the Jungle"

to be your kickoff anthem? Done. How about a sample from Prince's "Kiss" to follow up a sack? Any song you want can be altered and placed in the desired context within the game.

Madden's biggest development is undoubtedly EA's participation with Xbox Live, which evens the online playing field and should get more people involved in the amazing service. Now Xbox owners can enjoy the same great competition PS2 users have had.

The best intangible offered in *Madden* this year is the create-a-fan feature, which allows you to customize a front-row fan in hundreds of different ways. We went with a shirtless fat guy with a blonde beard in a Vikings helmet, whom we named Sven, because how can you go wrong with a shirtless fat guy cheering on your team?



Fourth Quarter Recap: *ESPN* makes a valiant last-minute push to overtake *Madden* with a 37-34 win.



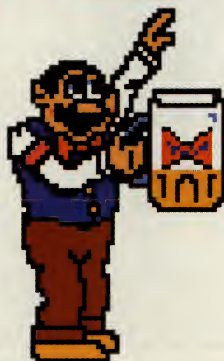
POSTGAME REPORT

Like last year's Super Bowl, this was an amazing matchup, and both titles come out looking like champions. In the end, only one team gets the rings, and *ESPN*'s solid gameplay and amazing presentation helped it bounce back from a poor third quarter to dethrone *Madden*, despite EA's superior franchise mode. Our suggestion? Dish out \$70 and enjoy the strengths of both titles. You can't go wrong with either game.



UNDER THE IN FLU ENCE

**In the name of,
er, science, we
research the
effects of
mass quantities
of alcohol
on game
performance.**



THE HYPOTHESIS

The self-appointed scientists at *SURGE* predict that under the influence of alcohol, gamers will lose their elite edge and tumble into mediocrity while playing games. If the gamer is extremely familiar with a certain game, we expect to see less of a performance decrease, as the classically conditioned skill set will take over in moments where the brain is swimming for the shore in Lake Vodka. To test the validity of our results amongst the nongaming population, we included a control test subject whose familiarity with videogames started and ended with *Super Mario Bros.* for the NES.



THE GAMES

Given our extensive backgrounds in the applied arts, we knew that drinking would probably affect game performance differently depending on the genre, so we included a healthy sample of games in our study:

Madden NFL 2004

Beer and football have always made a great couple—unless you're suiting up for four quarters. Can a drunken quarterback lead a last-minute comeback?

Scenario: To keep the blood boiling, we chose the classic Minnesota Vikings/Green Bay Packers rivalry, with 2-minute quarters on the rookie skill setting.

Unreal Championship

Unless you're in the Deep South, guns and liquor typically don't mix. If you throw a couple down before locking and loading, does it improve your opponent's chances of capturing the top prize?

Scenario: We went with a standard deathmatch versus the bots, with 30 kills to win.

Soul Calibur II

Fisticuffs are a natural part of the drinking life—ask Bukowski. But will drunken-style fighting be more effective when the gamer is drunk? A question for the ages.

Scenario: As Maxi, we endured a survival round to see how many fighters we could dispatch with beverages in one hand and nunchaku in the other.

Midnight Club 2

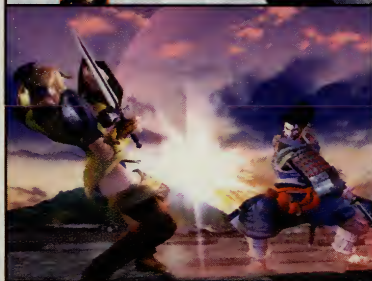
Drinking and driving—a professional athlete pastime brought to life in our test scenario. The law already has done an extensive study of this subject, but we threw it in for good measure.

Scenario: We didn't want to ruin an amazing car when we inevitably smash into traffic signs, so we raced around Los Angeles in the crappiest car in the game.

Rise of Nations

If Boris Yeltsin can do it, why can't we? While drinking may loosen our diplomatic skills, it remains to be seen if it will be for better or—like Russia—for worse.

Scenario: Not everyone was familiar with real-time strategies, so we chose the introductory quick battle for our test and limited the gameplay time to 30 minutes. Once the 30 minutes were up, we recorded the overall score along with the percentage of the map under drunken control.



THE GUINEA PIGS

Someone had to do it. It is with great reluctance that these four volunteers participated in this study of extreme binge drinking. Though science was always in the forefront of our minds, the free drinks were the clincher. **WARNING:** Don't try this at home. We did this for science, people, so that others wouldn't have to!



Matt Bertz

OCCUPATION: *SURGE*'s evil mastermind

FAVORITE GENRES: FPS, RPG, Action, Sports

BEVERAGE OF CHOICE: Vodka gimlet

PERFORMANCE RECAP: Matt can play *Madden* in his sleep, so playing drunk wasn't too difficult. While his offensive output slipped, the D stiffened up and kept the game out of reach for the opposition. *Unreal Championship* also proved a breeze, with a slight slip in accuracy as the only indicator of drunkenness. His hand-to-hand skills slipped in *Soul Calibur II*, as did his driving performance in *Midnight Club 2*. Matt proved an angry drunk, as his *Rise of Nations* strategy devolved to a barbaric design of all out war, which worked rather well. Who needs science and civics anyway?



Tal Pinchevsky

OCCUPATION: *SURGE* managing editor, Canadian citizen

FAVORITE GENRES: Sports, racing

BEVERAGE OF CHOICE: Gin and tonic (No lime, no straw, no tonic)

PERFORMANCE RECAP: Like the former Viking quarterback and DWI posterboy Tommy Kramer, Tal showed an amazing ability to up the ante with beverages in tow, beating the Packers by eight more points. Tal proved to be less adept in bar-fight situations. In *Unreal Championship*, his gunning slipped by ten kills, and he won two less fights in *Soul Calibur II*. Tal's drunken driving proved nearly fatal, as one wrong turn into a bad neighborhood took him off course long enough to double his time. In *Rise of Nations*, Tal went from Caesar to Nero in less than five drinks, losing more than half of the map in his inebriated defeat.



Les Shu

OCCUPATION: Freelancer extraordinaire

FAVORITE GENRES: *Animal Crossing* (it's its own genre), Action, FPS

BEVERAGE OF CHOICE: Gin and tonic (minus the gin)

PERFORMANCE RECAP: Les isn't a sports fan, so his drubbings in *Madden* were expected, though he did manage to score while drunk, something he didn't pull off in the sober round. Les' gun skills under the influence dropped by seven kills in *Unreal*, but his fisticuffs improved by two wins in *Soul Calibur II*, making him a deadly close-quarters fighter. Les won the hearts and minds of faux designated drivers everywhere with his amazing drunken racing skills. His time was only a few hundredths of a second off his sober time—and he doesn't even have a driver's license. His governing skills in *Rise of Nations* started modest and stayed that way, with only a slight drop in his overall score.



Corinne Cummings

OCCUPATION: Checker of facts, drinker of beverages

FAVORITE GENRES: CC is not a gamer; she's our control

BEVERAGE OF CHOICE: Free drinks

PERFORMANCE RECAP: Our control tester pulled off a surprising 7-0 victory against the Pack with a last minute Hail Mary toss to Randy Moss in her first ever game of *Madden*, but once she put a few away, it got ugly—fast—with a 26-0 loss. Corinne improved by an amazing 13 kills while chugging from the bottle during her *Unreal* deathmatch, and she dropped only one fight in *Soul Calibur II*. Corinne is definitely not a defensive driver. Her racing time improved by about 15 seconds, and she managed to push another car off course to advance her placing by one spot. As for *Rise of Nations*, you wouldn't want to be a citizen in her country. By the time she got to her second round, she basically watched the few people she started with gather food for 30 minutes before conceding utter defeat.

THE RESULTS

It wasn't pretty, but did you really think grandma's cough syrup would make you a better gamer?

Madden NFL 2004

	SOBER	DRUNK
Matt	63-17 Win	35-10 Win
Tal	24-14 Win	28-10 Win
Les	0-15 Loss	3-10 Loss
Corinne	7-0 Win	0-26 Loss

Unreal Championship

	SOBER		DRUNK	
	PERFORMANCE	ACCURACY	PERFORMANCE	ACCURACY
Matt	30 Kills	65%	30 Kills	57%
Tal	30 Kills	35%	20 Kills	30%
Les	26 Kills	47%	19 Kills	25%
Corinne	4 Kills	15%	17 Kills	21%

Soul Calibur II

	SOBER	DRUNK
Matt	8 Wins	6 Wins
Tal	10 Wins	8 Wins
Les	3 Wins	5 Wins
Corinne	6 Wins	5 Wins

Midnight Club 2

	SOBER		DRUNK	
	TIME	PLACING	TIME	PLACING
Matt	3:22:47	2/7	3:39:07	7/7
Tal	3:44:57	3/7	6:18:57	7/7
Les	3:30:54	3/7	3:30:97	3/7
Corinne	3:49:96	7/7	4:05:16	6/7

Rise of Nations

	SOBER		DRUNK	
	MAP CONTROL	SCORE	MAP CONTROL	SCORE
Matt	Total Win	8015	Total Win	6225
Tal	42-30 Win	2849	31-38 Lose	2449
Les	33-37 Lose	2005	37-40 Lose	2091
Corinne	37-34 Lose	1493	20-37 Lose	522



CONCLUSION

Our tests yielded mixed results. While the majority of gamers fared worse while drunk, a few people found enough grace in their inebriation to bolster their scores. Our money's not on a series of repeat performances over time. Let's just say we're not betting on the clan of drunks to win the next *Rainbow Six 3* tournament on Xbox Live.



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CMP

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TECHXNY
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CADSG

Slacking Off ON THE JOB

Unless you work for a sweet magazine like *SURGE*, chances are you don't get to spend your days playing on a console. That doesn't mean you can't sneak in a few web-based games in the midst of paper shuffling. They may not have 3D graphics, hot explosions, or, hell, even AI, but they will definitely kill time until 5:00 p.m. comes around.



Bushgame

www.bushgame.com

In *Bushgame*, the President and his band of incompetent imperialists are using Voltron (traitor!) to take over the world. It's up to He-Man, Mr. T, Hulk Hogan, and friends to stop them. Your characters side-scroll, jump, shoot, and Special Attack their way through the bowels of the White House to stop the GOP menace.

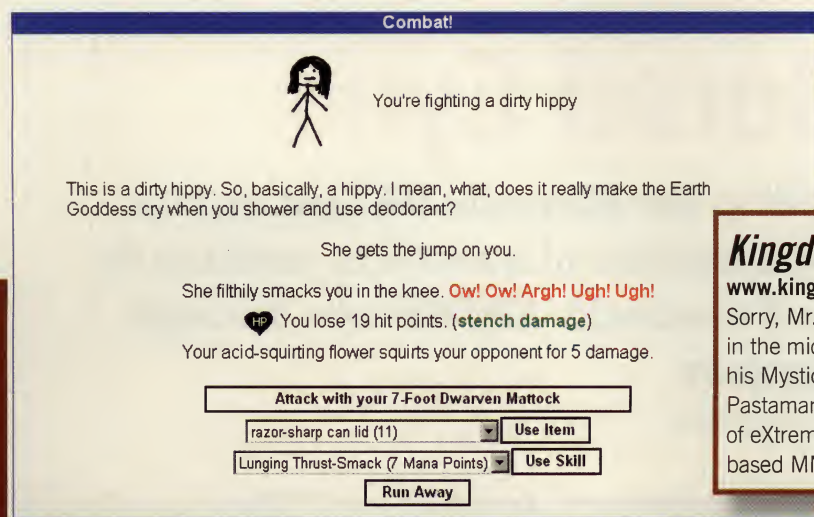
What it lacks in fancy gameplay, *Bushgame* makes up for in exhaustively researched cut scenes and plenty of retro charm.



Trogdor

www.homestarrunner.com/trogdor.html

We love *Trogdor*. In Strong Bad's version of *Rampage*, which is set in medieval times, you play as the coolest (and most crudely drawn) dragon since Puff, squashing villagers while running away from knights that sword you; kill ten villagers, and things get really fun. One word: Burninate.



Kingdom of Loathing

www.kingdomofloathing.com

Sorry, Mr. Lumbergh, can't file that TPS report right now. We're in the middle of a heated battle against a Knob Goblin and his Mystical BBQ grill. Zopf! Splat! Take that, Knobber! My Pastamancer just won some Meat, Cottage Cheese, and a pair of eXtreme Mittens. *Kingdom of Loathing* is our new favorite text-based MMORPG.

Insaniquarium!

www.popcap.com

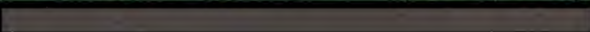
Do you have what it takes? What it takes to manage your own fish tank? To feed your fish regularly so they can grow up big and strong? What about aliens? What if some big ol' alien creep popped up and was all up in your tank trying to hurt your fish and oysters and other little babies? A harrowing experience, truly. If you think you have what it takes, give *Insaniquarium!* a shot.



UDDER INSANITY

 Lives: 0  Day: 3  Funds: \$-1025



MILK: 

Udder Insanity

www.designreactor.com/mutations/udder

The hardest—and possibly coolest—online game we recommend is *Udder Insanity*, which has you play a harried farmer saddled with milking cows that lactate at hyper speed. If you don't keep them milked, they expand and then explode, which may look hilarious, but costs you money.

Throw in the weird elfin dude, whom your farmer has to dispatch with a shotgun, and this is the first web-based mini-game that we think deserves an immediate port to Xbox.

Sight for Bored Eyes

As the initial hype surrounding the Nintendo DS dies and its release date draws nearer, a number of questions continue to surround this dual-screened handheld. *SURGE* cuts through the crap to get the hard answers.



In a few weeks, Nintendo will finally unveil its DS, and gamers across the nation will weigh in with their verdict: Will integrating two screens into a pocket console change the way people play games for the better? Or is it a gimmick to distract the public from the multitasking might of the upcoming Sony PSP?

The DS doesn't play movies or music like Sony's all-in-wonder, but it's not a technical dog, either. Up to 16 players can network within a range of 30 feet using its built-in Wi-Fi technology, and it delivers real 3D graphics in addition to voice recognition and stereo sound. That last upgrade came with the DS' recent redesign, which included a sleeker platinum flip cover and larger face and shoulder buttons. Add in backwards-compatibility with Game Boy titles, and Nintendo could have a hit on its

hands—if the price is right.

Of course, the biggest differentiator for the Big N is that second screen. In technical demos at E3, Nintendo showed off a handful of scenarios; some were appealing (Sonic running faster, depending on how fast you could zip the included stylus back and forth), while others seemed juvenile (passing digital notes using PictoChat). Now that some official titles have been added to the roster, including *Mario 64 x 4*, *Metroid Prime: Hunters*, *Madden NFL*, *Viewtiful Joe*, and *Mega Man Battle Network*, we wonder how many of the 100-plus developers will actually take advantage of the second screen, and how well.

Beth Llewelyn, Nintendo's senior director of corporate communications, attempted to shed some light on the DS' potential and what gamers can expect this holiday season.



Because of its more advanced feature set, do you think the DS may hook some older gamers who have abandoned their consoles?

Certainly. People can remember the thrills they had the first time they played *Tetris* on the Game Boy or *Super Mario 64* in 3D. No one had ever seen anything like those games before. Nintendo DS aims to recapture those feelings.

How much of the recent hardware retooling was based on customer feedback, and what changes do you think were most critical?

Once we had the prototype ready, our designers continued to work on the final model. It's difficult to say which features specifically came from them and which were based on feedback. We think the final model incorporates the best of all the ideas out there, such as the sharp new look and the dual speakers.

A lot has been said about the touch-screen capability of the device. What was the genesis of that idea?

Like the microphone input and dual screens, the touch-screen idea came out of discussions about looking for new ways for people to play. We didn't want to just bump up the technology. We wanted people to experience completely new ways to play that would set the bar high for all systems of the future.

What is the potential of this touch screen based on the games you've seen thus far and on games that are still in development?

At E3, we showed software that used the touch screen as a carving tool, as a keyboard with chat functions, as a way to move characters around the screens—even as a tablet to draw a Pac-Man, who then came to life. Not every title will necessarily use the touch screen. It's just one of the many tools that developers have to work with.

Do you think it might be difficult to play certain games that require use of both the stylus and action buttons?

Players have always adapted to new and interesting ways to play, from the introduction of the plus button to the modern console controllers, which are stacked with

everything from analog sticks to shoulder buttons. The stylus just gives developers one more tool.

Do you think the screen is sturdy enough for everyday use, and have you done any durability testing?

First of all, unlike some other devices, the two screens on the DS benefit from the protection of a fold-down top. And the touch screen is durable. The screen is designed to register the lightest touches, taps, and rubs, so there's no need to gouge the stylus into it.

Could you use the DS as a PDA out of the box, and if not, could you add this functionality with third-party software?

The Nintendo DS does not come with PDA capabilities, but third-party developers certainly could take advantage of its many functions to transform it. PictoChat already demonstrated the use of a keyboard on the touch screen, and the backwards-compatible slot for Game Boy Advance games could hold a host of new accessories.

Gamers are expecting to see their favorite characters come to life on the DS. How will you keep your franchises fresh on this new platform?

With all of its innovations, Nintendo DS certainly offers a full list of new possibilities for our popular characters. From voice recognition to the touch screen, players will be able to interact with their favorites in ways never before possible. Nintendo alone has 20 games in development. It's a good bet you'll be hearing more about our characters soon.

How important was it to include wireless functionality on the DS?

Because Nintendo DS is a social device, as well as a game device, it was important to find a way for people to connect with one another. We'll have Wi-Fi and our proprietary system available for developers to work with. Nintendo's guaranteed range is 30 feet, but [it] will extend far beyond that, depending on circumstances.

Will the DS be able to connect to the Internet for online play or surfing the web?

The Wi-Fi capabilities mean that, depending on what



One of the best games of all time is getting a makeover for the Nintendo DS. In addition to supporting the second screen to easily see where you are on the map at all times, Mario 64 x 4 supports wireless multiplayer action.

developers want to do with the software, some sort of presence for playing and communicating over the Internet is definitely possible. It all depends on the games, the types of games, and the developers' interest in the Internet.

How much better are the graphics on the DS than on the GBA?

With the newly developed graphics engine, DS can reproduce impressive 3D renderings that can surpass images displayed on the Nintendo 64. Games will run at 60 frames per second and allow details like fog effects and cel shading.

How do you think your mobile strategy differs from Sony's?

We can't speak for what anyone else is trying to do, but Nintendo DS has a lot of things going for it. It's not just some higher-tech version of a home console. It's durable. It has a flip-top cover to protect the

screens and no moving parts that could be damaged if you dropped it. The new cartridges are inexpensive, with faster load times and no possibility of being scratched. Nintendo DS offers users completely new ways to play.

It's obvious that the DS will be more expensive than the GBA. How much do you think mobile gamers are willing to pay?

As with any product, it depends on what people get out of it. Is it the same old thing redone in a new package, or does it bring users completely new experiences? Does it do ten things in a so-so way, or does it do a few key things in an outstanding way? All we want is to make an affordable product with a huge "wow" factor. And with two screens, a touch screen, wireless capabilities, and voice recognition, we're proud to say that the result is Nintendo DS. ☺

"IT'S NOT JUST SOME HIGHER-TECH VERSION OF A HOME CONSOLE. NINTENDO DS OFFERS USERS COMPLETELY NEW WAYS TO PLAY."

—BETH LLEWELYN

Vote With Your Fists

In this corner, we have a president who misled a nation to war, lost hundreds of thousands of jobs, and set environmental policy back to the industrial age. And in this corner, we have a flip-flopper with the charisma to match said shoe. What's a disillusioned voter to do? Beat them both up on your cell in *Bush vs. Kerry Boxing!*

On the opening screen, where you're appropriately greeted with "Hail to the Chief," you can either choose to go straight to the main event or to work your way up the political ranks on either side of the aisle in Campaign Mode. If you go the Democratic route, you'll face such Fox News-adoring foes as Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and John Ashcroft before taking on Bush. As a Republican, you'll have to mow down wanton tax-and-spenders Bill Clinton, Al Gore, Ted Kennedy, and John Edwards to get to Kerry.

The political theme continues with the names of the actual punches thrown, from the "Right Wing Hook" to the "Far Left Jab." We love Hillary Clinton as a referee, counting you out when you fail to "cover up." And who better to strut his stuff holding the round card between bells than potential spoiler Ralph Nader? All of the likenesses are so spot-on, you'll wonder if developer Sorrent will be sent to Guantánamo without supper.

Is this game as disposable as a hanging chad? Sure. But at least there will be a clear winner come November 2nd. The result of every bout will be automatically tallied and posted to an online Pugilist Poll.



Doing Expansion Right

MMO expansion packs keep the online community happy, but can they attract new subscribers?



Jump to Lightspeed will introduce space travel to the *Star Wars: Galaxies* universe, something many gamers clamored for from the start.

Most videogame developers will tell you that a game is never truly "done." The polishing and refining could go on endlessly, improving the graphics and gameplay, but most titles ship when the corporate weasels holding the purse strings demand it.

In the case of a massively multiplayer online RPG, the developer's work truly is never done. MMOs require constant maintenance, both physical (keeping the servers running smoothly) and emotional (keeping the subscribers happy). Given the demise of Ubisoft's *Uru Live*, the MMO from the developers of *Myst*, it seems that most new MMO developers need to relearn this lesson. "We're never done [with *EverQuest*]," says Sony Online Entertainment spokesman Chris Kramer. "We have as many employees supporting *EverQuest* [now] as we did when it was in early development."

Developers usually address smaller gameplay issues, such as programming bugs or unbalanced weapons and monsters, via patches that download in the background when the player logs in. Larger revisions, in particular content additions like new realms and races, require the mass storage of a CD or DVD to avoid choking the servers and players' ISPs with hundreds of megabytes of data. These expansions serve the secondary purpose of maintaining an MMO's presence at retail outlets and in videogame periodicals, such as the one you're reading.

Role-Playing Role Models

The first MMO expansion was *Ultima Online: The Second Age*, released roughly a year after the late-1997 launch of the genre-defining *UO*. *The Second Age* and four subsequent expansions introduced support for customizable houses, limited 3D graphics, Todd McFarlane-designed monsters, and *Diablo II*-esque combat. Together, they've made gameplay-hash out of what has proven to be a problem-plagued MMO. (Now-defunct developer Origin Systems was even targeted by a class-action lawsuit in 1998 for failing to deliver the gameplay experience it had promised *UO* subscribers.)

In the book *EverQuest Companion*, *EQ* designer Brad McQuaid says, "As [an MMO] grows and matures, the high end becomes a bit top-heavy and really needs a lot of new and challenging content." He would know. With eight expansions to date,

Expansionist Policy

Three titles that up the ante in the battle for online supremacy.

City of Villains

This expansion pack for the popular, comic book-inspired *City of Heroes* addresses most players' primary complaint: that they had to play as purveyors of justice (i.e., superheroes) and couldn't be disrupters of harmony (i.e., supervillains). Using a similar character creator as *City of Heroes*, you can peruse billions of possibilities in constructing your evildoer. As you battle Paragon City's vigilant dogoodniks, you'll have the opportunity to create covert villainous organizations and secret hidden bases. While waging war in this sprawling 3D world, remember that evil couture dictates moustaches for dictator-types, while masks, scars, and eye patches are best for criminal masterminds.



Final Fantasy XI: Chains of Promathia

You think the behemoth that is *FFXI* is already sucking your social life as dry as a raisin? You ain't seen nothing yet. The *FFXI* expansion will provide a number of new components to the massively multiplayer juggernaut. Most prominent of these will be new territories to explore, both inside and outside Vana'diel. That means 40 new areas to spend your days and nights sightseeing. You'll find new weapons and armor to play with and even new fish to, uh, fish for. There will be a host of new missions to enjoy, so stock up on NoDoz and get that fresh pot of coffee brewing.



Ultima Online: Samurai Empire

In the wake of the cancellation of *Ultima X Odyssey* by EA, a new expansion pack has risen from the ashes like a really time-consuming online phoenix. The expansion will take place in a more exotic Japanese land simultaneously inspired by geisha-era traditions and Hello Kitty-era camp. The primary focus of *Samurai Empire* is the introduction of two new professions for players to master: the Samurai and the Ninja. Pursuing the Samurai route means perfecting the art of Bushido and learning combat moves, while Ninjitsu means practicing the deadly arts, and when all else fails, tossing a smoke bomb and running like hell.



EverQuest has to be the role model for providing new content; each of its eight expansions has successfully built upon the original game without changing it for the worse, slowly increasing the size of *EQ*'s world of Norrath, beefing up content for experienced characters, and altering the core gameplay when necessary. For example, the third expansion, *The Shadows of Luclin*, updated the aging graphics engine in the face of competition from *Dark Age of Camelot*.

Sony Online Entertainment bundled all the currently released *EQ* expansions into a single box for retail sale, but it didn't create a sudden swelling of interest in the game. In fact, the controversial research of Bruce Sterling Woodcock has shown that MMO expansions don't have any measurable effect on the rate of subscriptions; instead, McQuaid argues, they simply keep current subscribers happy. *EverQuest* had already achieved the 400,000-subscriber milestone

before the release of *The Shadows of Luclin*; it now has between 400,000 and 450,000 subscribers.

Jumping to Conclusions

One expansion on the horizon might break this trend. *Star Wars Galaxies: Jump to Lightspeed* is one of the most anticipated expansions in the history of MMOs, not only because it's the first SWG expansion, but also because it will add many of the features that players expected from the original game.

Star Wars Galaxies: An Empire Divided launched in mid-2003 with seemingly infinite potential, but critics were unimpressed by the choppy animation, weak audio, dull combat, buggy missions, and bizarre lack of player-controlled land and space vehicles. Many reviewers advised their readers to wait for the release of the first expansion to see if LucasArts and Sony Online Entertainment could get the *Star Wars* formula right, and early reports indicate that they hit the wombat on the head.

Jump to Lightspeed introduces space travel and combat, and unlike the traditional round-based combat of MMOs, it's all real-time action, in the vein of LucasArts' classic space-sim PC franchises. "We're very determined to capture the feel of the *X-Wing* and *TIE Fighter* titles," says SWG producer Haden Blackman. Finally, all those simulator veterans can pull their flight sticks from storage.

Among the more than 15 player-operable ships are TIE Fighters, Bombers, and Interceptors, A-, X-, and Y-wings, Corellian Corvettes, "canonical" vehicles such as the Millennium Falcon, and several all-new creations. There are even nonplayer-controlled Star Destroyers to be seen (and feared).

On the larger ships, one player pilots, while his companions work the laser turrets or hang out on the ship deck, doing what they would normally do on land. In the MMO tradition of nudging players into working with each other as they reach higher levels, players will be required to form flight groups to take on more difficult missions. A character's statistics will slightly affect his in-game performance, but the primary requirement for success will be sharp hand-eye coordination.

Four new character classes and two new races supplement *Jump to Lightspeed's* space-based content (with a space zone for each of the game's ten worlds). The only profession revealed by SOE thus far is the shipwright, who builds, repairs, and customizes ships. Shipwrights are tied into SWG's player-driven economy, encouraging players to seek repairs from other players instead of obscenely expensive NPCs.

As long as there are MMOs, there will be MMO expansions to feed their subscribers' hunger for new content. If *Jump to Lightspeed* is successful, developers may start positioning their expansions to attract new gamers, as well. 



With fast-paced action similar to the classic *X-Wing* and *TIE Fighter* games, *Jump to Lightspeed* may attract new gamers to *Galaxies*.

Rainbow Six 3 Black Arrow

Xbox Livers rejoice!

Publisher Ubisoft | Developer Ubisoft Montreal | Genre FPS | ESRB M | Format Xbox

How do you best one of the most popular shooters on Xbox? With *Black Arrow*, Ubisoft played it safe with more of the same for the single-player missions and added an amazing array of multiplayer improvements.

The ten-mission single-player campaign looks and feels similar to the stellar original: The terrorists have an evil plot of disastrous proportions, and your job is to spoil the sinister fun. The enemy AI has the small, albeit useful, new ability to toss tear gas or grenades your way, but many of the terrorists continue to react a little slowly. Anyone with a trained trigger finger shouldn't have a hard time beating these under-trained hacks in a draw.

The smart level designs ramp up the difficulty: You'll find your safety compromised in several high-exposure areas where your four-person team can't possibly cover every angle of attack. In these areas, the game feels much more in line with its Clancy brethren in *Ghost Recon*, where patience and thoroughness is the name of the game. As with other *Rainbow Six* titles, your

team AI seems a little flat, but the new split-screen multiplayer allows you to bring along a mercenary friend rather than that bumbling Frenchman Loisele, who always dies first anyway.

The save system leaves something to be desired—you have a whopping two save points per mission. Each mission takes nearly an hour to complete, and if you don't finish what you started, you can't pick up where you left off at a later time. An unlimited and permanent save system would be a sensible plan for a campaign of this length.

Pedestrian single-player campaign aside, the upgraded multiplayer experience is the best Xbox Live has to offer. With a greatest hits selection of classic maps from the original and 14 new ones, *Livers* will once again pull all nighters with this extremely addictive game.



The new dynamic squad management system for competitive gamers is the best of its kind. Clans can identify themselves with custom insignias and player tags, which should cut down on the number of posers claiming to be members of high-profile clans. A squad inbox and calendar will make it easier to schedule tournaments and matches against other clans and keep everyone on the same page. Perhaps most

important to basement generals, the new prematch strategy room allows teams to analyze multiplayer maps and devise a game plan prior to taking the safety off their weapons. Taken together, all these additions set a new standard for online competition.

The multiplayer enhancements alone make *Black Arrow* worth the money; the single-player campaign is just a sweet bonus.

—Matt Bertz



The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay

Riddick done right

Publisher VU Games | Developer Starbreeze | Genre Action | ESRB M | Format Xbox

What happens when a licensed game is better than the original film property? Keep your eyes peeled for where the Riddick story line goes from here, because this is exactly what happened with *Escape from Butcher Bay*.

Rather than bore you with a redundant interactive simile of the film's plot, *Butcher Bay* expands the sci-fi universe of *Pitch Black* to tell antihero Riddick's back story. We meet up with Riddick as he is being transported to Butcher Bay, the badass prison of all badass prisons, where no one has ever come out alive. It's your job to guide Riddick through the sewers, air ducts, and legions of guards to set the new benchmark in prison escapes. Throughout the game you'll learn about Riddick's past, including how he gained his ability to see in the dark.

Butcher Bay offers a successful blend of FPS, RPG, and stealth-action elements. As you work your way through the prison levels, you'll meet and talk with your fellow inmates, who offer beef and advice at varying levels of interest. The characters are surprisingly well acted, and the cut scenes are short enough to keep the pace on target. When you venture out of lockdown areas, it's up to you to either stick to the shadows to avoid detection or create a little ruckus with a gun or hand-to-hand combat, which has been implemented surprisingly well.

The graphics in this game are head and shoulders above anything we've seen on the Xbox to date. The normal-mapped environments practically breathe the stench of the prison grime on

the walls, and the character models look absolutely amazing. With production values this high, it will be much harder for publishers to peddle half-assed games based on film licenses and get away with it.

Even if you're not familiar with the *Pitch Black* sci-fi films, *Escape from Butcher Bay* is worth a look. Riddick's only real crime (besides all those dead guards) is brevity; capable gamers can finish the game in less than ten hours.

—MB

Rating
8
10



The Rating Game

We hired a top team of think tank intellectuals to devise the Best Rating System in the World. After reading the 300-volume work we paid them millions of dollars to create, we canned that calculus-ridden crap for the 0 to 10 point scale. Those responsible for the report have been sacked.

While rating the game, we take into account the graphics, sound, replay value, gameplay, and story. The final score is a reflection of the total game experience.

10 The Holy Grail, la pièce de résistance, everything you wanted it to be and more, etc.

9 A great game by any standard, though not the best of its kind. If this game were a quarterback, it would be Dan Marino—great numbers, no championship ring.

8 The “controversy” rating. Hardcore genre fans may scream bloody murder that the rating isn’t higher, and passive gamers may think the game doesn’t deserve the rating.

7 A solid effort that lacks any real innovation, or an innovative game that lacks a solid gameplay experience. Take your pick.

6 You may get a few solid hours out of this game during a rental, but it’s definitely not worth 50 bucks.

5 to 3 The “irony” rating. The game is so bad it’s gone past good and back to bad again.

1 & 2 Poking a dead rat with a stick would be more entertaining.

The Executioner

Every so often a game that should have been stillborn slithers its way to store shelves, ready to prey upon unsuspecting victims.

The Executioner is here to return the game from whence it came.



ESRB Ratings

EC- Early Childhood

You know—unicorns, rainbows, and other things that entertain and educate little rug rats or Japanese teenagers.

E- Everyone

This is a family-friendly game with an abundance of wholesome fun. Some parents call these games “babysitters.”

T- Teen

These games have been known to crack one or two skulls along the path to victory.

M- Mature

Hookers, drugs, bloodshed, and sailor talk all rolled into one firebomb of a game. Long live the American Dream.

AO- Adults Only

Reserved for only the raunchiest of titles. The XXX of gaming.

RP- Rating Pending

Some aren’t doing their job fast enough.

Astro Boy

Super happy fun game

Publisher Sega | Developer Sonic Team | Genre Action | ESRB E | Format PS2



Sega's *Astro Boy* takes the globally loved robot-who-would-be-a-child and immerses him in a title that's both an RPG and an action adventure.

The game tells of Astro's humble beginnings at the hands of Dr. Tenma, a brilliant scientist who lost his own child and created a robot in his son's image. When the robotic community took his creation from him, Dr. Tenma unleashed a wave of violent robots on Astro Boy, knowing the conflict would tap Astro's enormous potential and force him to evolve. Unfortunately, the robots subsequently enslaved humans, and the world teeters on the brink of war.

Over the course of the game, Astro evolves and acquires rocket feet, an arm cannon, X-ray vision, a finger laser, and colossal strength. In typical RPG style, each skill is necessary to defeat specific enemies and gain access to previously unreachable areas. Characters and voices from the cartoon series give the game a sense of immersion, and the graphics are crisp and colorful, if a bit dated. Encounters with some of Astro's more famous enemies play like melee battles in *Zone of the Enders*, while its superb physics engine measures destruction to the environment as the robotic titans battle with lampposts and giant boulders.

Astro Boy's ease of play shows it was intended for younger gamers, and the game will come up short for hardcore action fans. In what seems to be an effort to make the interface as simple as possible, Astro's Homing Spin Attack and his basic punches are mapped to the same button, causing players to often charge straight toward an enemy when not expecting it. Oddly, camera rotation is mapped to a pair of shoulder buttons instead of the right analog stick, which is counterintuitive.

These pesky problems aside, fans of *Astro Boy* may enjoy the game. However, it doesn't quite live up to the success of its Game Boy Advance counterpart.

—Doug Trueman



Rating
6
10

Burnout 3: Takedown

Not the sequel to a Cheech and Chong movie

Publisher EA Games | Developer Criterion | Genre Racing | ESRB T | Format PS2, Xbox



Driving games have consistently grown since the tired, old days of *Pole Position*. While handling and realism become more incredible in each subsequent edition of franchises like *Gran Turismo* and *Project Gotham Racing*, the last time designers bothered to touch up the linear racing gameplay, Mario Andretti was tearing up Indy tracks. EA addresses that lag in *Burnout 3*, a fast-paced crash-'em-up that will have even the crystal meth addicts struggling to keep up.

Comparing the breakneck speed of *Burnout* to other racing titles is like comparing mainlining to freebasing. You probably shouldn't try either at home. As fast as *Burnout 3* is, its real incentive involves offensive driving—that is, driving that offends fellow drivers and pedestrians. As you accrue speed bonuses for such reckless activities as tailgating, drifting, and collisions, you'll want to take out other drivers entirely, wiping out their boost meters in the process. If NASCAR actually used cool cars and got

rid of the stupid oval, it might look something like this.

Burnout 3 gives you more than 60 international tracks and more than 60 vehicles to choose from, not to mention a stellar racing soundtrack courtesy of EA Trax and plenty of game modes to keep you occupied. The online mode features a number of fun mini games to enjoy, as well as Crash Events, enjoyably referred to around these parts as ultradestructo mode. In this collision mode, you have to initiate as large a traffic pileup as possible, ensuring that your insurance premiums never let you own an automobile again. In Road Rage mode, the goal isn't to finish first, but to take out as many opposing drivers as possible. With excellent handling, online applications, fast-paced racing, absolutely ferocious crashes, and a premium on hyperkinetic recklessness, you won't want to wait to put the rubber to the road.

—Tal Pinchevsky



Rating
8
10

Doom 3

Hell hath no fury like a soldier scorned

Publisher Activision | Developer id Software | Genre Action | ESRB M | Format PC

exciting for the first few levels, as you stare in awe at the lifelike models and atmospheric lighting effects. As the novelty of the technical achievement fades, a growing sense of boredom takes its place.

Doom 3 follows the original's story. You are a nameless marine, the sole survivor of a team sent to investigate problems at a research base on Mars. Shortly after you arrive, the problems become clear: The base has been overrun by demons.

The problem is that the game is basically a series of scripted events; imagine the opening sequence of *Half-Life* alternated with the lights-off moment in *Unreal*, over and over again. There are some genuinely creepy and unsettling moments, but they become incredibly predictable as you work your way through the base. Picking up armor or weapons almost always leads to monsters warping in, and after the first few times, it's just annoying. The scares aren't a payoff for a continuing sense of dread; it's more like someone sneaking up on you while you're making a sandwich.

Old monsters, like the mancubus and imps, are rendered in amazing detail, which is fun, and the game gets much better as it goes along. The later hell levels, in particular, look incredible, and help to break up the monotony of the Mars base. However, the game is too long and repetitive to be anything more than fun in short bursts; walking into a dark room, fighting a few monsters, rinsing, and repeating becomes tedious. *Doom 3* is a remarkable technical achievement, but it draws too much from the games that the original *Doom* influenced to be considered a great game.

—Ron Dulin

As fun as it is to reminisce about old games, the truth is that most of them don't stand the test of time. Take, for instance, *Doom*. When it was released in 1993, *Doom* was simply amazing. Its position among the best games of all time is warranted, and its lasting influence is undeniable.

Doom II, released shortly after the original, was basically an expansion pack with new levels, but offered little in the way of new content. That was fine: In 1994, more *Doom* was a very good thing. As a result, fans might be tempted to think that a technologically updated version of *Doom* a full decade later would be excellent. But, as evidenced by *Doom 3*, this isn't fully the case.

Calling *Doom 3* "technologically updated" is an understatement; on the right equipment, it's the best-looking game ever. Even on the lower-end system requirements, the game looks damn good. The excellent visuals manage to keep things pretty

Rating
7
10

DRIV3R

Put your seatbelt on and brace yourself

Publisher Atari | Developer Reflections | Genre Action | ESRB M | Format PS2, Xbox

DRIV3R makes an excellent movie. Unfortunately, it's supposed to be a videogame. Borrowing the free-form driving and sequential missions of *Grand Theft Auto*, Atari really tried, production-wise, with the latest in the *Driver* series. It hired Hollywood actors like Michael Madsen, Michelle Rodriguez, and Ving Rhames to do voiceovers, and brought back the director mode, allowing you to save and edit replays of your best car-chase moments. Atari tries so hard to blur the line between film and game (which *The Getaway* did more convincingly) that the gameplay suffers tremendously.

As Tanner, an undercover FBI agent who drives like a New York City cab driver, you infiltrate a Miami car-theft ring. The story eventually takes you to more exotic European locales, like Nice and Istanbul. The premise seems like a strong package—until you play the game. First and foremost, the vehicles handle horribly. Even Michael Schumacher would be all over the road.

Despite the game's title, you spend a lot of time outside your car. The problem is that the environments aren't at all intuitive, and the animations are downright laughable. We spent ten minutes just trying to find the police station's shooting range, watching Tanner move like he had a stick up his ass. The inability to really right ourselves outside the vehicle was stupefying. The AI on the road and on foot is also weak.

With Tanner looking stiffer than a constipated Frankenstein and a host of other visual gaffes, *DRIV3R* seems wholly unprepared for prime time, throwing a huge kink into a fun series.

—TP



ESPN NHL 2K5

Miracle on ice

Publisher Sega | Developer Kush Game | Genre Sports | ESRB E | Format PS2, Xbox

Gamers who know a cross-check from a cross Czech (who might feel inclined to give you a cross-check), have long been neglected. Since EA's *NHL '94*, immortalized by Vince Vaughn in *Swingers*, hockey nuts have had little to cheer about. That changed with *ESPN NHL 2K4*, heralded by many as the most complete hockey game ever. *2K5* manages to build on that foundation.

The speedy and authentic gameplay in *2K5* looks fantastic. Highlighted by a new pass-and-go system that

allows you to play off the puck when your team has possession, this year's update is faster, although the concussion-inducing hits have been toned down. With several national and historic NHL teams (we love the 1968 Montreal Canadiens), *2K5* gives you tons of different modes to enjoy. A huge Party Games area offers several unique games that allow you to practice specific skills without going through a tired training system. Other arcade modes, battle modes, and mini-rinks—not to mention pond hockey—provide serious replay value.

Kush has introduced some new gameplay features, like total stick control and intense contact control, that, while expanding play somewhat, aren't especially useful. With the ability to adjust team strategies for everything from defense to breakouts to your powerplay, *ESPN NHL's* gameplay is still the best around. Commentary from Gary Thorne and Bill Clement often lags behind the speed of the game, but it beats most of the sports commentary you find in today's titles.

Sega claims the game's franchise mode is improved, and in some areas it is, but it mostly lags. Minor league rosters consist largely of fictional players, trades are easy to pull off, and free agents generally tend to be money-grubbing punks. The off-season, consisting of international scouting, drafts, free agency, and more, provides the greatest incentive for franchise mode. Online league modes are the best franchise-esque mode you'll find. Either way, in the increasingly likely event that the 2004-05 NHL season doesn't happen, at least we have *ESPN NHL 2K5*

—TP

Rating
8
10

Full Spectrum Warrior

This is my rifle, this is my gun

Publisher THQ | Developer Pandemic | Genre RTS | ESRB M | Format Xbox

Full Spectrum Warrior started as an urban combat simulation created to train the U.S. Army's infantry. The game turned out so well that the developers at Pandemic couldn't keep it from the public, so they set out to make a diet version for Joe Consumer. The result is a unique blend of real-time strategy and action never before seen on a console.

Players take control of two four-person fire teams dropped in a gorgeously rendered Middle Eastern war zone, where the army is trying to gain control of a strategically important city. The command and movement control is easy

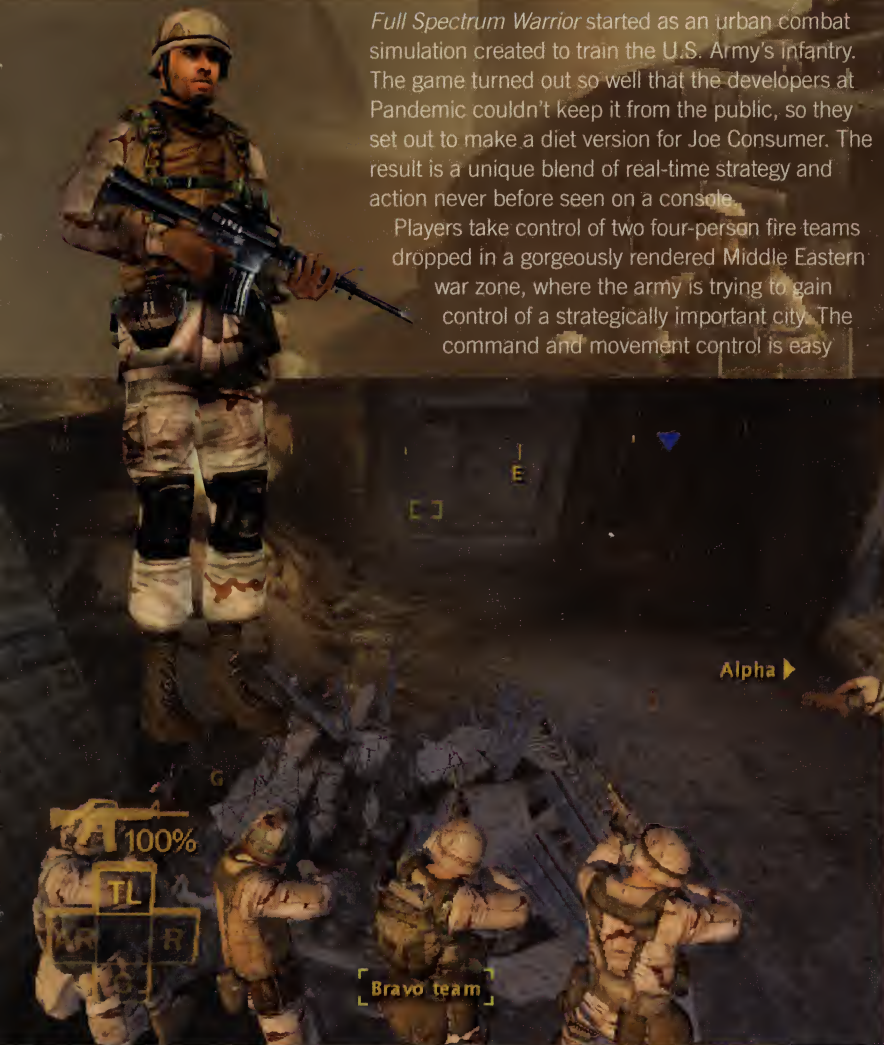
to manipulate, so the training level will have you commanding troops like a grizzled grunt vet in no time. Though you never actually shoot the gun, you tell the team when and where to fire and move, much like your standard top-down RTS games. After your training, survival is the name of the game, as you must lead your teams through a labyrinth of abandoned streets and alleys, taking out hostiles and completing objectives ordered via your radio set. You can also play co-op via Xbox Live.

The general gameplay, though intense, is a repetitive quest for the best angle for a kill shot. When you enter a hot zone, your fire teams will often find themselves pinned under heavy fire. It is then up to your second fire team to maneuver through the streets to get a good shot on the aggressive natives. Rinse and repeat, and 11 missions later you are finished with the game.

Though the gunplay is intense, its arbitrary rules of engagement can frustrate any veteran gamer used to taking tangerines out with 100-yard headshots. If an enemy is positioned behind an object, whether it's a car or a building corner, he is virtually impervious to anything smaller than an M203 grenade. Even if he's standing so his torso is exposed, your men will be hard pressed to land a deathblow to his skull. This isn't because your men are bad shots, but because the game is registering the enemy as being safe behind coverage (at least that's what we told our troops to keep the morale up).

Full Spectrum Warrior brings a new and inventive control scheme to the console, but in the end, the strategy wears thin and leaves you wondering what could have been.

—MB



Rating
7
10

Ghosthunter

Who you gonna call?

Publisher Namco | Developer SCEE | Genre Action | ESRB T | Format PS2

Ghosthunter tells the tale of Lazarus Jones, a rookie cop investigating a report of strange activity in an abandoned high school where several students were murdered. As soon as Jones and his partner enter the halls, a sinister specter abducts his partner and ghosts tear through the classrooms. An AI construct in the school's basement enlists Jones as a ghost hunter. The action isn't confined to the campus; a series of portals leads Jones around the world as he attempts to recover lost spirits and restore order. Armed with several weapons (why do bullets from a Glock 17 hurt something without a body?) and a boomerang/ghost-capturing device, Jones imprisons everything from playful poltergeists to malicious ex-murderers.

The game is a standard third-person action/shooter title with the odd puzzle thrown in for good measure. Shortly after his adventure begins, Jones meets up with a shapely female apparition called Astral, whom he can summon at specific points. As a ghost, Astral is the key to overcoming many of the game's

obstacles; she can fly, pass through certain walls, knock over objects, and lure and possess other spirits.

Ghosthunter, with its energy lasso, capture grenade, and fusion of bizarre comedy with disturbing imagery, owes many of its concepts to Ivan Reitman's 1984 movie *Ghostbusters*—but the developers clearly recognized this and gave its characters a tongue-in-cheek sense of humor.

Though *Ghosthunter* is billed as an interactive thriller, it doesn't come close to providing the supernatural terror of titles like *Resident Evil*. If you can stand the campy humor, there's enough in the tank to warrant a rental.

—DT

Rating
7
10

Hot Shots Golf Fore!

Shooting for par

Publisher SCEA | Developer Clap Hanz | Genre Sports | ESRB E | Format PS2



Though *Hot Shots Golf Fore!* has a cheesy name, it provides much of what you look for in a casual golf game. With plenty of unlockables, a bunch of courses, mini golf, online play, and an entertaining sense of humor, the game shoots well under par.

The simplistic gameplay hasn't changed much from the previous editions. As always, the system works on the well-defined three-click system to start your swing, gauge your power, and determine your accuracy. You can add topspin or backspin to the ball and hit a specific part of it.

The game characters are a kitschy collection of humorous stereotypes you normally wouldn't find on a golf course, and you can unlock Sony favorites Ratchet, Clank, Jak, and Dexter. The cartoonish graphics won't win any art awards anytime soon, and the limited number of quips the golfers spit grows old pretty quickly. The single-player mode is uninspiring, but it's a great party game. For the competitive types, the online mode is where you can test your mettle.

The mini-golf mode is the most fun and most addictive mode in the game; the scoring is based on how far your shots can travel, so long as they land in the cup in two shots. It challenges your putting game, but the putting system is so good that most of the shots won't feel impossible.

In the end, *Hot Shots* is a decent golf game, but there isn't much here that you can't find in similar titles.

—James Stevenson



Rating **7**
10

The Saga of Ryzom

The little MMORPG that won't

Publisher Tri Synergy | Developer Nevrax | Genre MMORPG | ESRB T | Format PC



In the modern gaming biz, smaller developers and publishers have learned to survive by catering to the hardcore segment, releasing games in niche genres that larger publishers have abandoned in their quest for mainstream audiences. They have not done well when attempting to compete directly with the big boys—and no genre is more competitive in the PC gaming world than MMORPGs, which makes *The Saga of Ryzom* seem like a fool's errand.

Created by a newbie French developer using an open-source engine, *Ryzom* takes place in a world of "science fantasy," which means that it delivers both the Tolkien-esque clichés of fantasy games and the *Star Wars*-esque clichés of sci-fi games. It also delivers a long list of impressive MMO features, from harvesting and crafting to player housing and pack animals. None of these are truly innovative, but most of them are reasonably entertaining by MMO standards. In addition, the game has an unusual, subdued aesthetic that reflects its European origins.

Perhaps *Ryzom's* greatest strength is its character customization, which allows the player to tweak the size and shape of everything from chins and arms to ears and breasts. Other niceties include a skill system that eschews experience levels for gradual increases, and spells with editable parameters (such as range, duration, and strength). But why doesn't *Ryzom* take any real chances with its gameplay? It's a luxury that only smaller developers can afford, yet they seemed to have passed on the opportunity.

Ryzom's developers are so confident in its success that they've already discussed its planned eight-year lifespan; the story will gradually unfold to reveal the secrets of the world. It'll be lucky to survive eight months in the face of its overwhelming competition. It's not that *Ryzom* is a bad game; it's that *EverQuest II*, *World of Warcraft*, *Final Fantasy XI*, *City of Heroes*, and the revamped *Star Wars Galaxies* are better games buoyed with better engines, better programmers, better designers, and more robust worlds.

—ZM

Rating
6
10

NASCAR 2005: Chase for the Cup

Somehow, more popular than football

Publisher EA Sports | Developer Tiburon | Genre Racing | ESRB E | Format GCN, PS2, Xbox



The Sport of the South may not have the gaming lineage of *Madden*, but *NASCAR 2005* is the first title to treat the track with the same reverence given to other major sports. The title challenge is a ten-race replication of the Nextel Cup challenge, but the meat of the game lies in building a race team and conquering four circuits, including feather-light Craftsman trucks and the venerable stock courses.

First off, last year's grudges and alliances go further into pro-wrestling territory with new hero/villain status. Racing clean earns hero points, while bumping and grinding to victory puts players on the dark side. And as Yoda knows, running the evil line is a lot easier than playing nice. Either way, player status gains fans and sells merch, which leads to the new

managerial game. Those who like to give orders can buy a racing team and manage every dollar spent, while pure wheel men can simply drive. Good and evil mechanics add a lot on the track, but owning a team sends *NASCAR 2005* several steps ahead of past releases and the competition.

Solid racing balances all the bells and whistles. A huge array of real speedways, all nicely modeled, helps make your 1,000th lap as compelling as the first. Jockeying for position is a fun balance of patience and chutzpah, and EA has properly scaled cars and tracks so that a 40-car pack feels crowded. The physics have improved greatly; speed now bleeds away realistically as players feather the throttle across a turn. Accidents are scarce (check *Burnout 3* if that's your interest), but the AI is aggressive and, if not always realistically intelligent, at least challenging enough. *NASCAR* has finally hit its stride, providing ample reason to make just one more lap around the oval.

—RF

Rating
8
10

NCAA Football 2005

We're putting this franchise on probation

Publisher EA Sports | Developer EA Sports | Genre Sports | ESRB E | Format GCN, PS2, Xbox

Rather than trying to compete directly with EA's powerhouse *Madden* football franchise, *NCAA* strives to recreate the pageantry and atmosphere of the college game. Fight songs, mascots, and player recruitment all give the game an enormous sense of Saturday afternoon clashes and varsity spirit.

The big addition this year is the home-field advantage. To give the game a greater sense of realism, each stadium recreates the atmosphere of the college campus. This is an instant advantage for teams like Nebraska and its Sea of Red because visiting teams lose composure and miss audible calls due to the crowd noise. When you're playing in front of a raucous crowd, the screen and controller will shake to show how crazy loud those drunken co-eds can get.

The right analog-based match-up stick allows gamers to evaluate the effect the crowd is having on the players on both sides of the ball. On the road, freshman players will often become overwhelmed by the spectacle and will not perform up to their potential. A smart coach can exploit this.

The gameplay has taken a step backward and

feels much less polished. While the player-composure element seems like a good idea, it frequently prevents you from completing a pass when you're on the field with younger players. Even wide-open receivers drop an amazing amount of passes—that is, if the ball makes it past the amazingly agile defenders, who seem to tip balls like all-pros. The best bet is to set your feet before you throw, never put too much heat on the ball, and target composed receivers. Play action works more often than standard drop-back plays, but even then the quarterback accuracy is unrealistically low.

The game's graphics and presentation don't come close to the grandeur of *ESPN NFL 2K5*. The animations take only a small step forward, and EA recycled last year's commentary. However, the weekly *Sports Illustrated* issue, which covers big developments around the NCAA, is a solid addition.

Much like the receivers in the game, this year EA dropped the ball when it counted most. At best, *NCAA Football 2005* offers a decent alternative to the pro games.

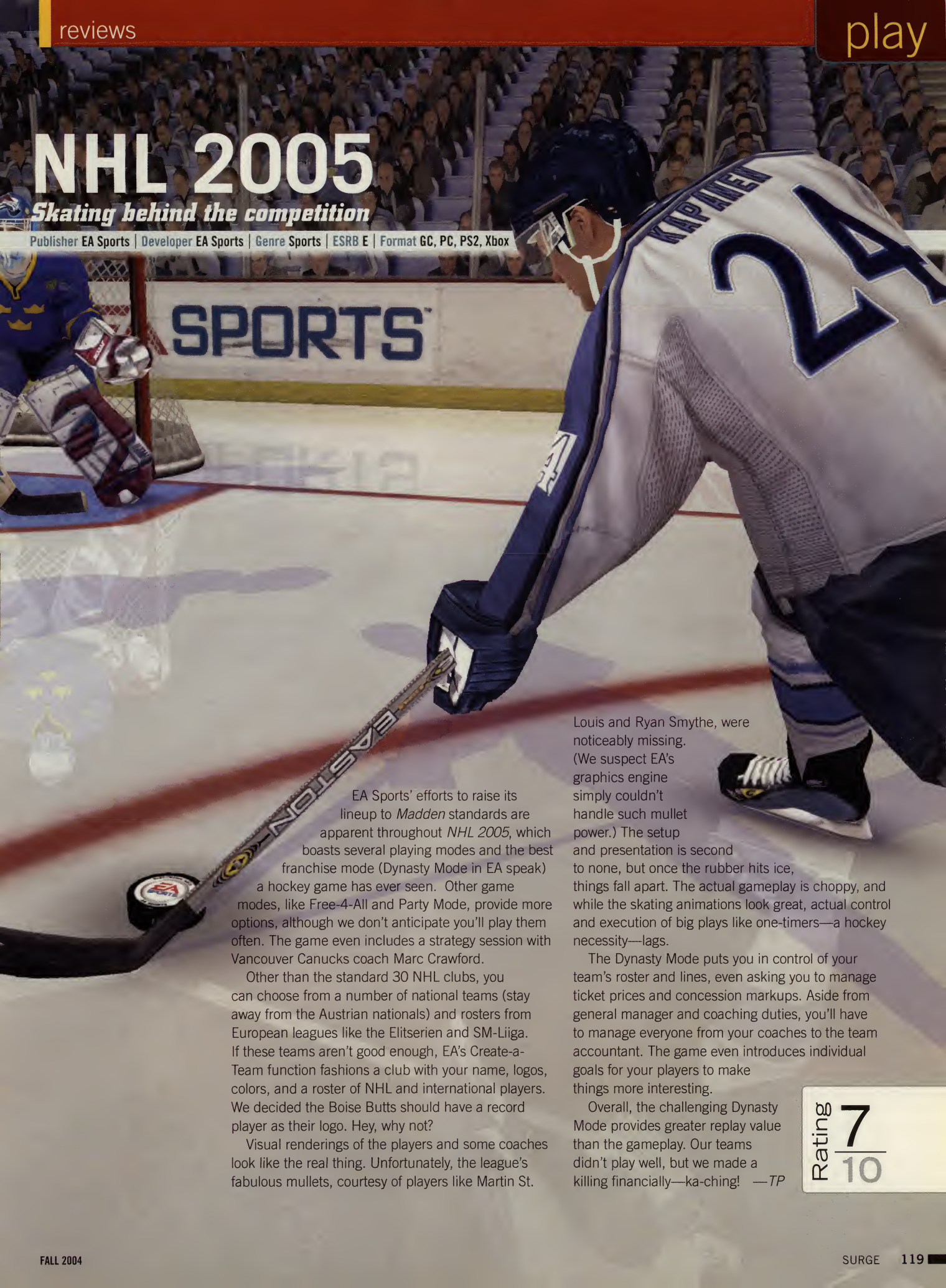
—JS

Rating
7
10

NHL 2005

Skating behind the competition

Publisher EA Sports | Developer EA Sports | Genre Sports | ESRB E | Format GC, PC, PS2, Xbox



EA Sports' efforts to raise its lineup to *Madden* standards are apparent throughout *NHL 2005*, which boasts several playing modes and the best franchise mode (Dynasty Mode in EA speak) a hockey game has ever seen. Other game modes, like Free-4-All and Party Mode, provide more options, although we don't anticipate you'll play them often. The game even includes a strategy session with Vancouver Canucks coach Marc Crawford.

Other than the standard 30 NHL clubs, you can choose from a number of national teams (stay away from the Austrian nationals) and rosters from European leagues like the Elitserien and SM-Liiga. If these teams aren't good enough, EA's Create-a-Team function fashions a club with your name, logos, colors, and a roster of NHL and international players. We decided the Boise Butts should have a record player as their logo. Hey, why not?

Visual renderings of the players and some coaches look like the real thing. Unfortunately, the league's fabulous mullets, courtesy of players like Martin St.

Louis and Ryan Smythe, were noticeably missing. (We suspect EA's graphics engine simply couldn't handle such mullet power.) The setup and presentation is second to none, but once the rubber hits ice, things fall apart. The actual gameplay is choppy, and while the skating animations look great, actual control and execution of big plays like one-timers—a hockey necessity—lags.

The Dynasty Mode puts you in control of your team's roster and lines, even asking you to manage ticket prices and concession markups. Aside from general manager and coaching duties, you'll have to manage everyone from your coaches to the team accountant. The game even introduces individual goals for your players to make things more interesting.

Overall, the challenging Dynasty Mode provides greater replay value than the gameplay. Our teams didn't play well, but we made a killing financially—ka-ching! —TP

Rating **7**
10

Psi-Ops: The Mindgate Conspiracy

Get psyched for this one

Publisher Midway | Developer Midway | Genre Action | ESRB M | Format PS2, Xbox

Commend Midway for pulling off the gaming industry's comeback of the year. After sidelining its hokier sports titles, like *NFL Blitz* and *NHL Hitz*, the developer has developed strong games, like the reinvigorated action-horror hit *The Suffering* and the b-ball fantasy *NBA Ballers*, which appeal to adult gamers. *Psi-Ops*, the latest addition to this Midway renaissance, might be its most original title yet.

On the surface, *Psi-Ops* is your typical third-person, military-themed gun blazer, complete with espionage, government conspiracy, and a B-list script. Midway's new take on action, however, makes the gameplay addictive.

As agent Nick Scryer, you must infiltrate a covert terrorist organization, known as the Movement, which uses psychic means to achieve evil ends (world domination and such). Your memory has been erased, and as you confront your past, you recapture psychic powers, like telekinesis, pyrokinesis, and the ability to see through walls into the next room.

These new powers make the gameplay; nothing beats picking up enemies with your amazing brain power and throwing them across the room into an explosive container. The real surprise is how intuitive the controls are, despite all the powers you possess. The mission puzzles that require your character's psychic ability will actually test your brain, although the game is a *Rambo*-esque bloodfest for the most part.

The levels are fairly large, and while the enemy henchmen don't pose much of a challenge, the level bosses have cans of whoop ass waiting for you. Each

boss has a dynamic personality and devastating powers, so it might take a few tries to finish one of them off.

The cut scenes and overall story line are silly, but at least Midway makes an effort to introduce some twists into the plot. Lame dialog aside, the cinematics are strong. It all makes for an innovative title with gameplay that outshines its story. Isn't that the way action games should be?

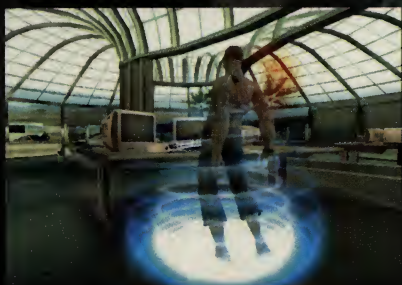
—TP

Rating **8**
10

Second Sight

Seeing is believing

Publisher Codemasters | Developer Free Radical | Genre Action | ESRB T | Format GCN, PS2, Xbox



It's never a promising sign when a game has an amnesiac for a protagonist. Surprisingly, *Second Sight* manages to rise above this hackneyed device to become one of the most innovatively structured games in recent memory. As John Vattic, you wake up in a medical facility with no recollection of who you are or why you are there, and soon discover you have powerful psychic abilities.

What makes the game good is not the story itself. Rather, it's how developer Free Radical tells the story. Levels alternate between the postpower Vattic and the prepower Vattic, with the latter leading up to how he gained the powers and the former showing the aftermath. It's a novel format, one that could have made an otherwise great game a classic—or at least a good game great.

Second Sight is nearly a great game. It's too short, and you gain all of your powers far too early, making the later levels a bit too similar and lacking in surprise. It plays like a combination of *Resident Evil* and *Metal Gear Solid*, and gives you a fair amount of freedom in how you solve each section. Your powers,

which range from telekinetically tossing people around or possessing enemies and using them to attack their cohorts, allow you to stealthily move through most areas or go on a killing spree, whichever suits your fancy. But, once you find a particularly good strategy, you'll find yourself using it over and over again until that rare instance where there is a specific way to solve a particular puzzle.

Second Sight has some good elements, and it deserves praise for trying to incorporate some interesting storytelling techniques. It's definitely a good choice for rental. Ultimately, it lacks any surprises other than its many plot twists. Because of the small number of powers and its short length, this game delivers too little substance to garner a wholehearted recommendation.

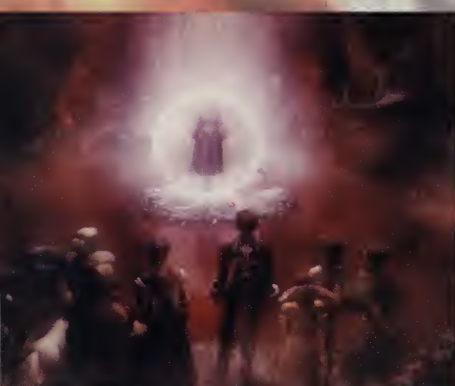
—Wyatt Shaker

Rating
7
10

Shadow Hearts: Covenant

The best non-Square Enix, Eastern-style RPG since Disgaea

Publisher Midway | Developer Aruze | Genre RPG | ESRB T | Format PS2



Rating
8
10

Shadow Hearts was a late-2001 RPG that grabbed the attention of hard-core RPGers with its unique story line, exceptional translation (Midway's first-ever localization of a Japanese game), and gimmicky combat system. *Shadow Hearts: Covenant* builds upon the successes of the original game while fixing most of the failures, just as any good videogame sequel should.

The most obvious and important improvement is in the visuals. While the original *SH* sported lots of low-res 2D (as it was likely conceived as a PS1 game, but moved to the PS2 partway through development), almost everything in *Covenant* is in glorious, high-res 3D. A few of the character models and animations rival the production values of the almighty Square Enix, which is the highest praise.

The Judgment Ring, a radar-shaped variation of a golf-game swing meter, remains the centerpiece of combat, but *Covenant* allows more Ring customization than the original *SH*. There's now a range of Rings to suit a player's button-tapping ability, including an auto-Ring for the truly feeble. Characters can join forces to launch combo attacks, which require sharper timing than solo attacks. It's not a particularly deep system, but the action-based Ring keeps the combat fresh.

Covenant's eccentric sense of humor is reflected in moments of pure slapstick, amusing dialogue, and oddball enemies, such as the wooden ducks that attack the player in leap-frog succession. It's wonderful to play an RPG that isn't afraid to poke a little fun at itself and the genre as a whole.

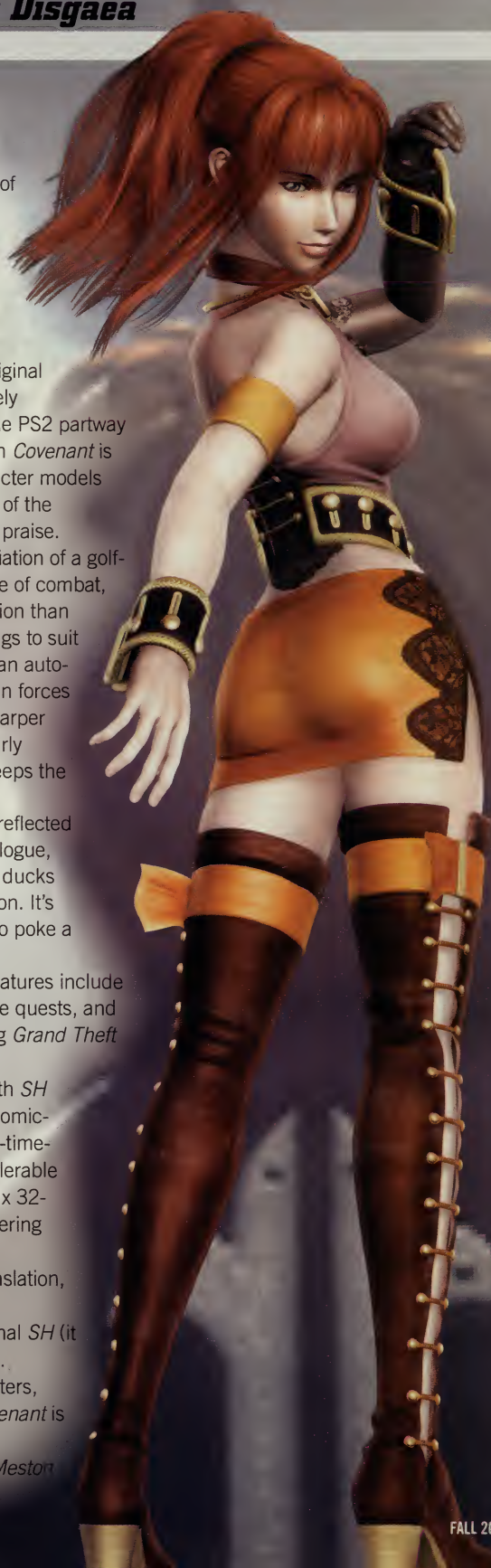
Other new and/or improved gameplay features include robust in-game tutorials, spell-enabling side quests, and an abundance of meaningless but amusing *Grand Theft Auto*-style statistics.

The only serious flaw that appears in both *SH* and *Covenant* is the embarrassing use of comic-book thought-bubble emoticons in the real-time-rendered cut scenes. These were barely tolerable in the days when RPG characters were 16 x 32-pixel encephalitics, but they're mood-shattering anachronisms on the PS2.

A milder issue is *Covenant's* English translation, which suffers from occasional lapses into awkwardness, unlike the script of the original *SH* (it was outsourced to a different organization).

With its superb plot, solid cast of characters, and addictive battles, *Shadow Hearts: Covenant* is a first-rate RPG.

—Zach Meston



Silent Hill 4: The Room

Taking a turn for the worse

Publisher Konami | Developer Konami | Genre Survival Horror | ESRB M | Format PS2

The creak of drying, dying branches means that the time has come for another trip to *Silent Hill*. Title aside, this tale doesn't take place entirely in a room—it just starts and ends there—but it is nonetheless leaner and lonelier than any episode to date. This *Silent Hill* story shares only a tangential relationship with previous titles in the series. It makes obvious references to Stephen King and David Lynch, and a couple of *Rear Window*-style scenes reveal the game's voyeuristic tendencies. Combine these with a looping plot structure, and there's promise of new complexities—that the game never delivers.

Room 302 is a stagnant, one-bedroom apartment in which Henry Townsend finds himself confined. It's fully furnished, right down to the inter-dimensional portal, which (sadly) doesn't lead to John Malkovich. Instead, it opens on a decaying realm populated with the rotting dogs and palsied demons we've come to expect from the series. Control in 302 is first-person, but the greater

balance of the game uses the series' third-person standard. Movement is a little bit blocky and jerky, but four games into the series, we've accepted it and moved on.

Combat that uses a power meter, dodging moves, and simple combos is good, but with unchallenging enemies, who cares? Classic horror environs are smartly recycled; there are good new sights, and the plot is kind of cool. Dull exploration, linear puzzles, and an uncomfortable sense of déjà vu all hobble the design and waste the fantastic graphics and soundscapes. It's impossible to ditch the creeping fear that *The Room* is a Frankenstein monster, with series hallmarks grafted onto what should have remained a spin-off, creating a sequel that shouldn't be.

—RF



Rating **6**
10

Street Racing Syndicate

Racing to the bargain bin

Publisher Namco | Developer Eutechnyx | Genre Racing | ESRB T | Format GCN, PC, PS2, Xbox



Ah, street racing—such sweet validation for enthusiasts of neon and superfluous plastic modifications. *SRS* was supposed to hit the bricks last year (to compete with *Need for Speed: Underground*), but its original publisher, 3DO, went bankrupt, making *SRS* an orphan, until Namco stepped in. Now, however, *NFS* isn't the only competition. There's a fight brewing with the feature packed *Juiced*. The two have a similar approach and ethos (yeah, we said "ethos" while discussing street racing), but *SRS* ends up looking like the lightweight.

Players have a choice: Race open city streets, taking minor challenges from other drivers while evading cops, or enter multirace events to make a name and score new girlfriends (seriously). Winning nets cash and respect from other racers, which is necessary to progress and unlock cars. Earn extra respect by performing hot moves (drafting, catching air, etc.) and by linking them into combos. Then, blow the wad on licensed upgrade parts and new rides. The cars are good looking, but too homogenous and not overly detailed.

On the street, things look fine—solid frame rate, a good sense of speed, and plenty of things to break. The actual races feel pedestrian, though, with unchallenging AI and frequent rubberbanding. Making up a lost lap is easy, but once you're in first, the other cars are glued to your bumper. Better AI would create more challenge on the pavement and eliminate the need for such dodgy tactics. There's a minor damage model and the option to bet on races, but in both places the implementation is limited. Fixing damage isn't necessary to enter a race (unlike *Juiced*), and even after a dozen head-on collisions, we were going strong. That's par for this course, though. *SRS* makes a superficial attempt at crucial details, but doesn't have the dedication to go all the way to the finish line.

—RF

Rating
4
10

Sudeki

Great combat—shame about the rest

Publisher Microsoft | Developer Climax | Genre Action RPG | ESRB M | Format Xbox

Microsoft's green machine is a massive flop in Japan, which is why the Xbox library sorely lacks an RPG with Eastern "flava"—no Japanese developer is willing to make one. This is presumably why Microsoft asked the British lads at Climax to do their best Square Enix imitation. The result of Climax's copycatting labors is *Sudeki*, a decent hack and slash trapped inside a feeble action/adventure game.

The real-time combat sequence is *Sudeki's* sole strength. Two of the four characters are short-range brawlers, executing sluggish attack combos with a timed button-press system shamelessly stolen from *Phantasy Star Online*; the other two are long-range snipers who move and shoot from an FPS perspective. The character customization and weaponry are decent, but hardly enough to compete with the best of the genre. Each character has a handful of flashy, bloody special attacks, but you have to access them via the inventory menu, which rudely interrupts the action.

You won't want to interrupt the action for anything, because when the fighting ends, the boredom begins. The protagonists are one-dimensional feebs with instantly forgettable names and faces, the story line is a parade of fantasy clichés, the puzzles practically solve themselves, and the plot and gameplay are painfully linear—to the point that magical walls appear to trap you within each combat sequence.

Sudeki's voice "actors" receive no credit in the game or the manual—either they're friends and relatives of the developers, or Climax is trying to prevent enraged gamers from tracking them down and beating them up. Every line of dialogue is delivered by a man or woman who believes that reading his or her lines in a stereotypical accent is an adequate substitute for emotion. Crappy voice acting was barely acceptable at the dawn of the CD-ROM in the early 1990s.

No gamer wants to spend 50 bucks in 2004 to hear a QA tester's little brother do his Frito Bandito impression.

Sudeki isn't a total wipeout, but it's a major disappointment, an ankle-deep weekend rental promoted falsely as an epic blockbuster. The Xbox is still waiting for its first great Japanese RPG.

—ZM



Rating
6
10

Terminator 3: The Redemption

T3 Redux

Publisher Atari | Developer Paradigm Entertainment | Genre Action | ESRB T | Format GCN, PS2, Xbox



After the first *Terminator 3* game failed miserably under the redundant and uninspired gameplay, Atari is taking a shot at redemption, in word and in deed.

The Redemption follows the plot of the movie closely. The game begins in the postapocalyptic future, where the old-school Terminator is being reprogrammed to fight the new Terminator, who is much more attractive and deadly. You must then fight your way to the Sky Net facility to send yourself back to 2003 to protect John Connor from those vicious eyes, lips, and tendencies toward assassination. The game adequately recreates most of the movie's best moments and keeps the spirit of the movie intact. Then again, plenty of games do the same thing, with better graphics and sound.

The gameplay is a mix of standard third-person action, vehicle combat, and rail-shooter levels. While on the move, your job is to take out baddies while hopping from vehicle to vehicle to keep your ass intact. You can hijack Sky Net vehicles to up your arsenal. Your Visor mode gives you all a Terminator needs to clean house, including quick targeting and information about your surroundings.

As you clear levels and count enemy casualties, you earn terabytes, which you can spend on attribute upgrades. The system isn't too pricy, and getting the upgrades isn't that hard.

The game features a Co-op mode, but it works only for certain levels in the game. This is a downer to say the least, as playing with a buddy always makes a game more entertaining.

It might be worth a rental for the James Cameron faithful, but *The Redemption* doesn't fully redeem or satisfy.

—JS



Rating
6
10

Test Drive: Eve of Destruction

NASCAR is for sissies

Publisher Atari | Developer Monster Games, Inc. | Genre Racing | ESRB T | Format PS2, Xbox



We know what you're thinking: *Test Drive* has gotta be some concept car thing, right? Not exactly. Instead of celebrating technical experimentation, *Eve of Destruction* is a festival of homegrown, dirt-farmer derbies—the only racing arena this series hasn't hit in its 17-year history. Developer Monster Games has taken to the back roads with gusto.

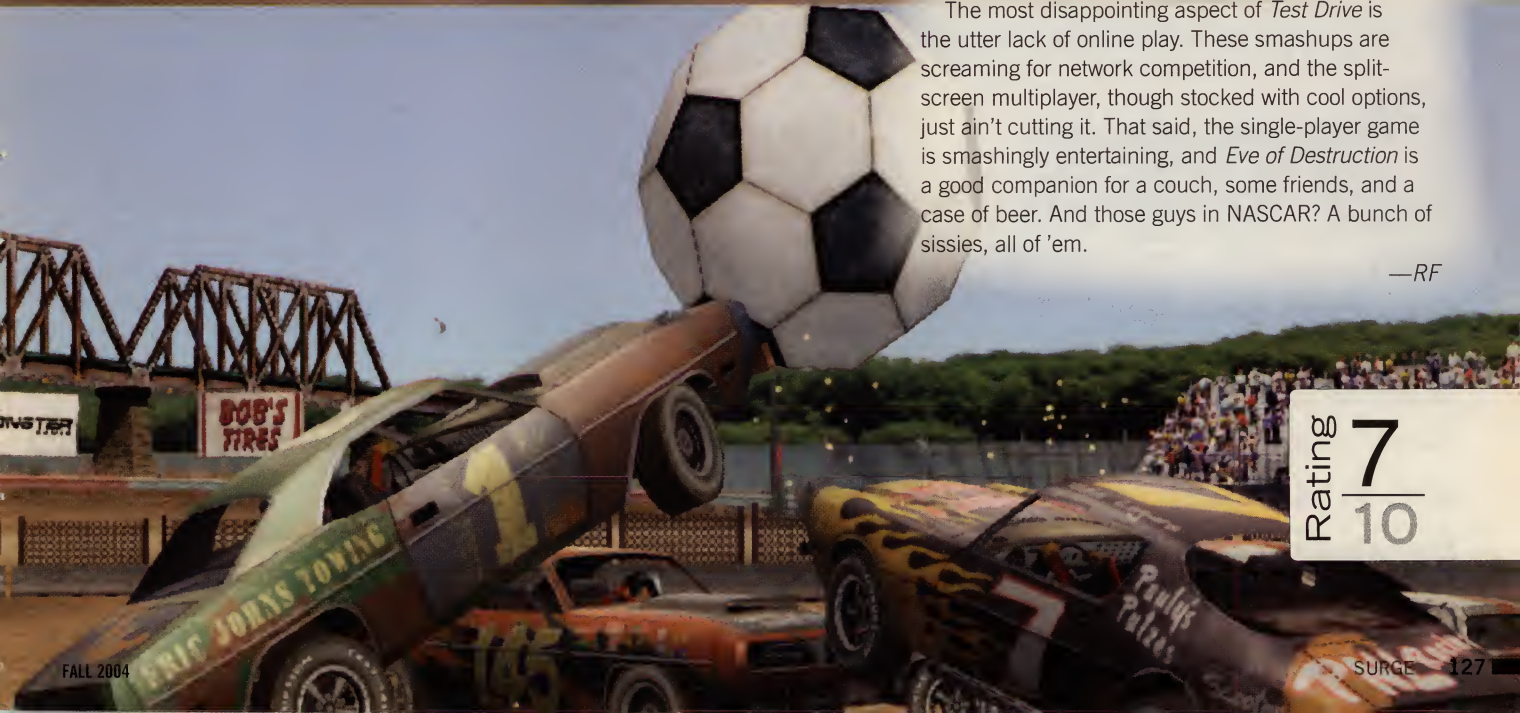
Action is split between a large career mode and instant competition in an array of 20-plus races. Career mode pushes new drivers through the screen door armed with a rust bucket, a few bucks, and a total disregard for safety. Climb the demolition-derby ranks, buying and beefing up cars, betting on single races and competing in large derbies.

The races, all of which encourage dealing out damage and knocking out the competition, are seriously diverse. Suicide has half the pack driving against the direction of the other half, and chain races have drivers towing other cars, which must be preserved to win. Meanwhile, the Figure 8 Jump drops drivers on an figure-8 track with jumps at the cross. Watch for the cool slo-mo cam when cars collide in midair.

The tracks may not be ultradetailed, but the game is smooth, the damage is visualized nicely, and the 30 cars are well balanced. Look elsewhere for realism—physics lean heavily toward the arcade, all the easier to pick up and play.

The most disappointing aspect of *Test Drive* is the utter lack of online play. These smashups are screaming for network competition, and the split-screen multiplayer, though stocked with cool options, just ain't cutting it. That said, the single-player game is smashingly entertaining, and *Eve of Destruction* is a good companion for a couch, some friends, and a case of beer. And those guys in NASCAR? A bunch of sissies, all of 'em.

—RF



Rating
7
10



Cross Examination

Comedian, actor, and poster boy for the young and disenfranchised, David Cross has gone from Generation X to Generation Xbox. by Corinne Cummings

So, what games are you playing these days?

I'm almost done with *James Bond: Everything or Nothing*, which is a great game. Better than the reviews suggest. I ran into some of the guys from Rockstar, and we were talking about me doing a voice for *San Andreas*, like a guy on the radio or something. It's like, "Yeah, I'll do it for free, I don't give a shit, just give me a game." So, they sent me a bunch of stuff, and I'll probably start playing *Red Dead Revolver* when I'm done with *James Bond*. By then, that other shit's gonna be out. Between *Halo 2* and *San Andreas*, forget it! My winter is covered.

I have to go back to L.A. to shoot [the Fox comedy *Arrested Development*], and there's tons of downtime where you're just sitting around. Now, that time, instead of spending it reading the newspaper, working on a project that would benefit humanity, I'll be playing one of those two games, if not both at the same time.

What do you think about the element of comedy in videogames as it stands right now?

Oh, it's excruciatingly bad. You can have the greatest game in the world, but when it's trying to be funny and it's not—it's corny and it's stupid and the voice work is awful—it just ruins the game. I don't know why they don't spend an extra couple of bucks and get good comedy writers in there to punch up the script and make it interesting and unique.

You've done voice work on *Halo 2*, and now you're talking with Rockstar about working on *San Andreas*. Do you plan to do more with videogames?

Oh, not at all. That was just because I'm a fan of those games. It's funny, though; almost in a gloating way, I was very excited about doing *Halo*. I got the 23-page script, and a third of it was all like, "Oh no!," "Ouch!," shit like that, and like, "Get 'em!," "Stay down!" But you know, there's a lot of kinda sarcastic shit in there, too. I was very excited about doing it.

As they were giving me a ride back to Seattle [from Bungie's studio], I was sitting there thinking, "Ha ha, this is really going to annoy my friends. They're going to have to listen to my voice saying stuff that's going to take them out of the game." Then, about 15 minutes later, as I'm gleefully thinking about that, I was sitting there thinking, "Oh, wait a second. This is going to bum me out! It's going to bug me while I'm playing this game. I'm going to be playing, and I'll be like, 'Oh, shut the fuck up, me!'"

You play role-playing games, or are those too time consuming?

Nope. Way too faggy. Sorry. Way too nerdy-faggy. Sorry guys. I gotta draw the line somewhere.

You play PC at all?

No! I refuse! This interview is over! ☺

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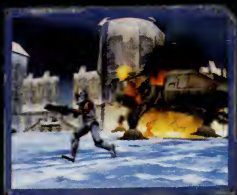
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